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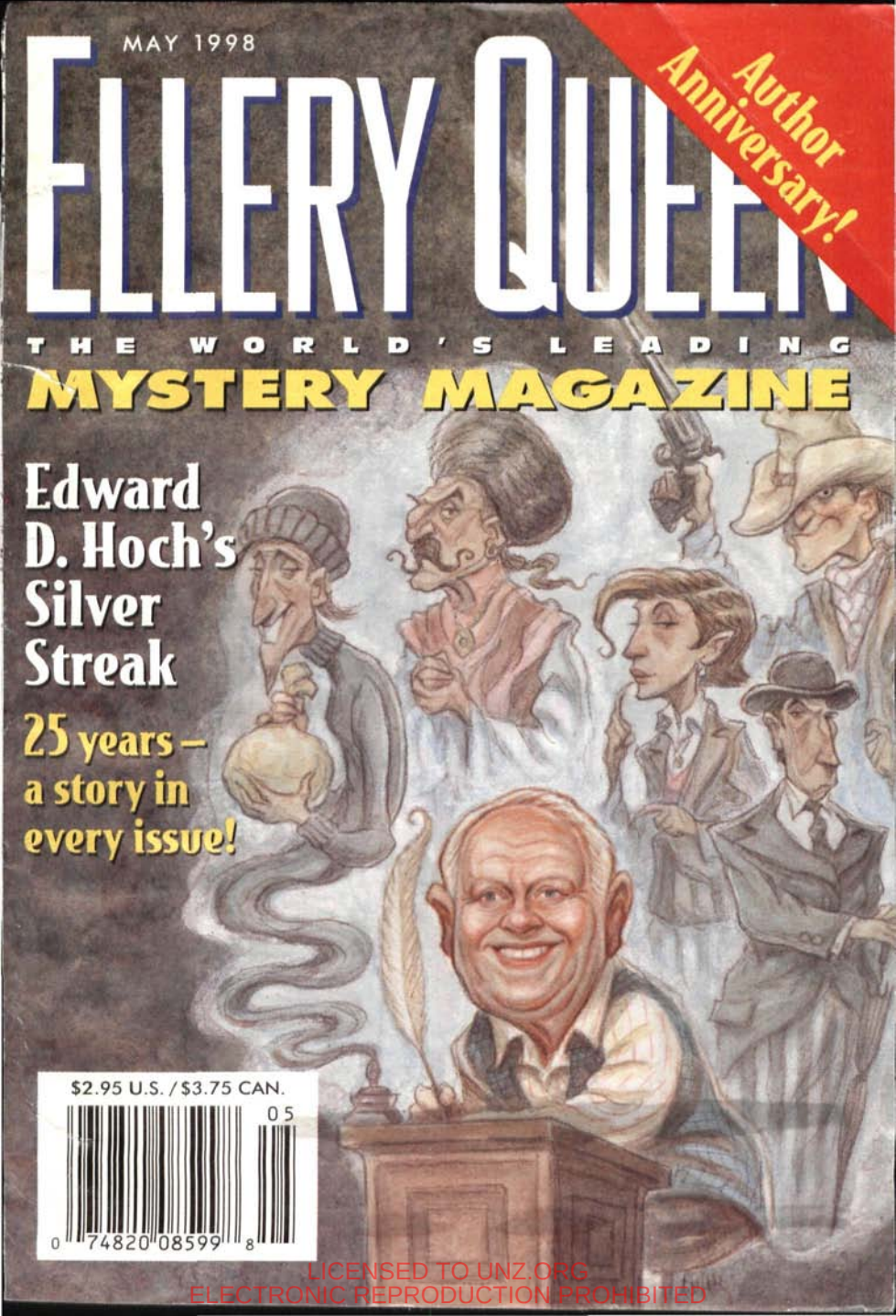

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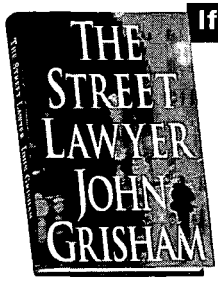

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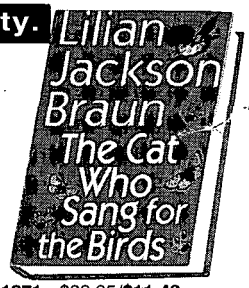

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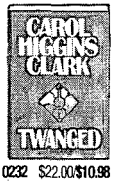

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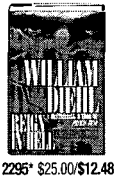

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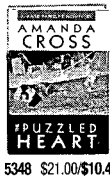

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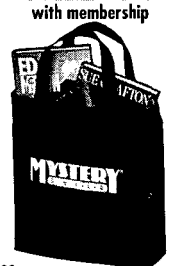

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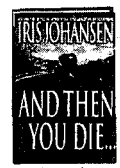

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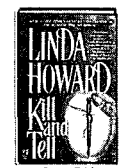

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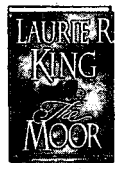

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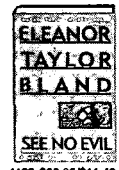

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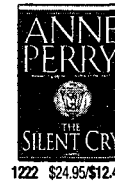

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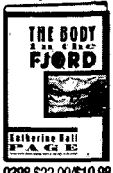

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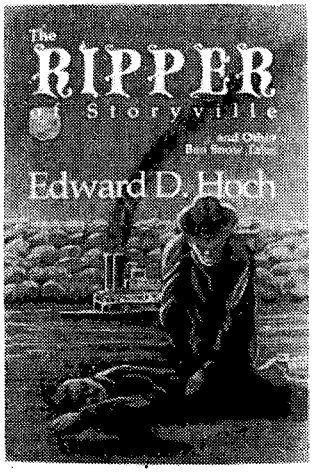

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A RECORD-BREAKING 25TH ANNIVERSARY

Over the twenty-five year period from May 1973 to May 1998, Edward D. Hoch has provided us with 335 stories in 320 consecutive issues. This month's issue is a milestone in a lifetime of outstanding achievement; yet Mr. Hoch's twenty-five-year streak of unbroken publication in *EQMM* did not begin by design. It evolved from a telephone call he received from *EQMM*'s editor, Fred Dannay, back in 1973. On that momentous day Dannay remarked that since he had several Hoch stories on hand he was going to start publishing one in every issue. Who could have divined then that the talented author from Rochester, New York had the stamina and imagination to supply the magazine with high-quality stories for a lifetime? None of *EQMM*'s editors has ever had reason to break the remarkable streak that began with that phone call, for Mr. Hoch's popularity with readers has never waned, and the quality of his stories remains as high as it was in the 1960s, when he was not only the magazine's most prolific author but one of the few writers the Ellery Queen team trusted to ghostwrite stories and books bearing the Ellery Queen byline.

Asked to explain his phenomenal ability to create well-plotted, carefully-crafted tales month after month, Mr. Hoch says that ideas come to him easily. Although he is also the author of five novels, only the short form allows him to get his deft whodunits on paper before a whole new set of characters and situations occurs to him. The author's output for *EQMM* is enormous, including 74 tales published before consecutive presentation of his stories began in 1973, but it represents only about half of his total body of work. By the time stories he has already completed appear in the summer of 1998, Mr. Hoch will have published nearly 800 short stories in sources ranging from anthologies of original fiction to virtually all the important mystery fiction magazines in operation since the mid fifties. One of the stories *EQMM* did *not* publish is especially notable: his Edgar-winning story of 1968, entitled "The Oblong Room" (*The Saint Mystery Magazine*).

Although the numbers attached to Mr. Hoch's work are impressive in themselves, they tell only part of the story of his remarkable career. He can be credited with almost single-handedly sustaining the detective short story through a period in the '60s and early '70s in which most writers had abandoned it in favor of psychological suspense. Through his steadfast adherence to the traditional whodunit, he helped *EQMM* to maintain its character as a magazine offering the full range of detective and mystery fiction. We owe him a great debt, not only for providing our readers with superior stories month after month, but for his beneficial influence on the character and direction of *EQMM*.

We dedicate this issue to Edward D. Hoch, one of the great mystery writers of our time. May his unforgettable characters (including those who surround the author left to right on our cover: Nick Velvet, Michael Vlado, Susan Holt, Ben Snow, and Jeffery Rand) add intrigue to our pages for decades to come!

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The Theft of Gloria's Greatcoat

by Edward D. Hoch

Friends sometimes ask how I met Nick Velvet and how I could ever have fallen in love with a professional thief. The second part of that is easy, because for a good many years into our relationship I believed his stories about engaging in secret government work that called for frequent travels to distant cities. The occasional thefts I knew about were only incidental to this, I thought.

As for the first part, how we met, I suppose that's an interesting story. It happened more than thirty years ago, in November of 1965, when I was a girl in my early twenties named Gloria Proctor, just out of a community college in Ohio and determined to make my way in the big city. I'd arrived in New York shortly after graduation and by the fall I had a low-paying job in publishing and a nice apartment down in Stuyvesant Town.

It was a time of increased American involvement in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson was our president, and John Lindsay had just been elected mayor of New York. I was young and the city was an exciting place to be. Actually, I'd never planned a career in publishing, preferring the world of art. There was always a sketch pad handy, though I soon learned that I was best with caricatures. There was hardly a market for those unless one was a political cartoonist, an all-male world if there ever was one. So it was publishing for me, at least for the time being.

I decided I couldn't get through the winter season in Manhattan without a good overcoat, something I could wear to work that would also look good at holiday parties. On my budget I couldn't afford too much, but I went searching for something stylish and I found it in a bargain shop on Seventh Avenue. The autumn of '65 was the beginning of a brief Russian craze in fashion, inspired by the film version of Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago,* which wasn't

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even opening until December. I bought a bright red greatcoat that reached to mid calf, accented by a long knit scarf of red and black stripes. The ornamental frogs on the front of the coat gave it a vaguely czarist look. I couldn't believe my good fortune in finding it at such a reasonable price until I wore it the first time, to the office and to lunch one blustery day. It was still the first week of November but the wind had turned uncommonly chilly. Winter coats were making an early appearance, and at lunch I saw the identical coat on another woman.

"You can't let things like that bother you," Samantha Rodgers told me. She was a friend and coworker, a brooding brunette a bit taller and ten years older than me, who'd been a friend since my first day at Neptune Books. We were lunching on the lower level of Rockefeller Plaza by the skating rink, about a block from the office. It was a place beyond my budget but Samantha was treating. "Actually, you should feel good about it. That other woman in your coat happens to be Mary Todd, wife of Sam Todd, the record producer. He's got this new British group, the Augers, who could be bigger than the Beatles."

I shook my head sadly. "I'm not into rock music."

"Neither am I, much, but there are certain people around town that you just have to recognize."

"I'm sure she paid a lot more for her coat than I did over at the Seventh Avenue Outlet."

"Maybe not. Wealthy people like bargains too."

That was on a Friday and I spent a quiet weekend around my apartment, enjoying a return of crisp but sunny weather. The parklike area of Stuyvesant Town was especially pleasant in the fall when we didn't have to worry about the lack of air conditioning in our apartments. If nothing else we could watch the antics of the rare black squirrels that made the area their home.

By coincidence, I saw Sam Todd on television Sunday night. He appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show,* chatting with Ed and introducing the Augers to an American audience. Todd was a stocky man in his forties who seemed to be wearing a bad hairpiece. He had a slight accent that I couldn't quite identify, and he made much of the fact that by appearing on Sullivan the Augers were following in the footsteps of Elvis Presley and the Beatles. Though I often switched channels when a rock group came on, curiosity kept me watching. There were five Augers and they were lively enough, wearing tight pants and gyrating with their electric gui-

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tars. I decided they needed a drummer to carry the beat, but then no one was asking my opinion. When Ed called for an encore I switched to *The F.B.I.* on channel seven.

Monday morning was warm but cloudy and I wore my light raincoat to the office. It was a busy day at Neptune, with first proofs on two spring novels due from the typesetter. I was an editorial assistant to Max Rhinegold, one of their senior editors, a man of great knowledge and a fiery temper. Much as I admired him, I wondered how long I could continue working for him.

"Are the proofs in yet, Gloria?" he called out from his office that morning, shortly after I arrived.

"I don't see them. I'll check the mailroom."

The proofs weren't in, and within minutes he was on the phone to White Plains. I didn't enjoy listening to his familiar shouted vulgarities so I went down to Samantha's office until he'd finished. "You just have to ignore it," she told me. "He'll calm down." She spoke from experience. Of all the editors at Neptune, she worked most closely with him. Now she tried to cheer me up by saying, "I've got a couple of tickets to that new musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. It's supposed to be pretty good. They're for tomorrow night. If you're free we could have dinner after work and go to the theater."

"Thanks, Samantha, but I'm getting together with one of my neighbors tomorrow. I appreciate your offer, though. I know they're charging $11.90 for those tickets."

She nodded. "It's a new Broadway high. They'll price themselves out of existence pretty soon."

I'd joined Samantha at a Broadway play once before. She'd told me then that her mysterious boyfriend had purchased the tickets but was unable to join her that night. If the same was true of these tickets I wondered if the boyfriend might be married. It wasn't a question I'd ever ask her, though.

Tuesday evening's engagement was with Helen Coin, a young woman about my own age who lived one floor up from me in our Stuyvesant Town building. She made jewelry in her spare time and she invited me up to see some of it, suggesting we might go out to a movie afterward. I suppose she hoped to sell me a piece or two, but it sounded like a pleasant enough evening and I'd told her I'd come around seven. On Tuesday afternoon, when Max Rhinegold decided to knock off early, I decided to do the same. "Early" at Neptune Books meant 4:30 at best, and that was the

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time I went out the door. I walked over to Lexington Avenue, enjoying the sunny autumn afternoon. The temperature was fifty-seven degrees according to one of those bank signs, about average for early November, but I knew it was due to turn cold again the following day. I caught the crowded subway down to 14th Street and walked the three blocks east to a corner of Stuyvesant Town. From there it was only minutes to my apartment, and I unlocked the door shortly after five o'clock.

The first thing I saw was the man's smile, because the growing darkness all but obscured his face. I switched on the living room light and asked angrily, "What are you doing here?"

He was by the open closet door, just a few feet away from me. He closed it and said coolly, "I might ask you the same thing. This is my apartment."

That made me hesitate for just an instant, feeling a bit like Alice in Wonderland. Had I entered the wrong building by mistake? Was I in someone else's apartment? Then I saw the familiar furnishings, carefully gathered during my six months in the city. "Like hell it is!" I responded, my voice rising in a mixture of anger and fright. "Who are—?"

He took a quick step closer to me and clamped a gloved hand over my mouth. That was when I realized I was being robbed.

"Please be quiet," he said softly into my ear, "and you won't be hurt."

When he loosened the pressure on my mouth I mumbled, "You're a thief."

"Not exactly."

For the first time I took a moment to study his face, trying to remember it for the police. He was older than me, perhaps in his early thirties, well-dressed, with darkly handsome features, liquid brown eyes, a firm jaw, and a classic Roman nose. He might have been Italian-American but I couldn't be sure. Tall, just under six feet, and in good physical condition. His body was firm as he pressed against me, holding tight.

"Why don't you let me go?" I asked after a moment.

He grinned at me. "Maybe I like holding you." Our lips were very close together.

A shiver ran through me as I imagined myself being raped and possibly murdered. For the first time since entering my apartment I was terrified.

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He must have felt my terror because he relaxed his grip a bit. For a moment I thought he was about to release me but then he pulled a roll of adhesive tape from his jacket pocket. He was going to tie me up!

I kicked out at him then, catching him on the shin, and broke free for an instant. But he shoved me off balance and I tumbled off the side of the sofa, ending up on the floor. "You have nice long legs," he said, ignoring my attempts to kick him again. He pulled a long piece of tape free from the roll.

That was when the lights went out.

I crawled free, out of his reach, seeking safety before the lights went back on. It was my apartment and I knew it like the back of my hand. I tried to crawl as quietly as I could toward the bedroom, knowing I could lock the door once I was inside. Everything was black as pitch and for the first time I realized there were no lights outside either. No lights anywhere that I could see, except on passing cars.

I'd just reached the area of the bedroom door when a small beam of light suddenly targeted me. Of course! No self-respecting burglar would go on a job without a flashlight. "Ah, there you are!" he said.

"Here I am," I conceded. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. What happened to the lights?"

"Beats me."

"They've been out several minutes, all over town from the looks of it. Do you have a transistor radio?"

"In my bedroom," I admitted.

"Let's turn it on."

"You're the damnedest burglar I ever heard of. Why didn't you just run away?"

"Get the radio," he commanded. "I want to know what's happening."

I found it on my bedside table and turned it on. ". . . the entire Northeast and parts of Canada. We're still trying to learn the cause of this massive blackout which has brought subways and elevators to a halt all over the city and may have trapped thousands of rush-hour travelers. Only an emergency generator is keeping us on the air."

"You'd better get out of here," I told him.

"On the contrary, I think I'd better stay."

"What?"

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"The police are going to be roaming around, looking for possible looters. I might be stopped and questioned."

"That's nonsense! There are lots of people on the streets." I could see the movement of car lights from the bedroom window.

Our conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. I stared into the flashlight beam, waiting for his reaction. "Answer it," he ordered, "but be careful what you say."

I picked it up and heard the voice of my upstairs neighbor, Helen Coin. "Gloria, are your lights out?"

"They're out all over the Northeast, Helen. It's a massive power blackout."

"Then I guess the movie is out for tonight."

"I'm afraid so."

"Want to come up anyway and I'll open a bottle of wine?"

His head was close to mine, listening to the conversation. At her suggestion he shook his head. "I guess not, Helen. The elevators aren't running and I'd probably trip on the stairs in the dark. We'd both better stay put."

I hung up and faced my burglar again. Somehow the phone call had renewed my confidence that I could handle the situation. "If you insist on staying, why don't I get us something to eat? I'm hungry even if you're not."

He was silent for a few seconds, considering my offer. "What have you got?"

"Without my electric stove, it's pretty much sandwiches. Ham or chicken."

"Ham is fine. How about a beer?"

"I can do that. Let me light a few candles."

To this day I don't know what it was that instantly made us trust one another. It certainly wasn't love at first sight when you're trapped in a darkened apartment with a burglar. The glow of the candles, which could have been eerie under the circumstances, was cheerful instead. I made the sandwiches, slicing the bread in half. "Sorry I can't toast it."

He smiled at me. "That's all right."

"Ah, my name is Gloria, by the way."

"I know."

"Yeah, I guess it's on the door." But then I remembered only my last name was in the little slot over the bell. "What's yours?"

He smiled at me, his brown eyes reflecting the candlelight, as he seemed to weigh a decision. "Nick," he answered finally.

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"Do you do this sort of thing for a living, Nick?"

"It's not what it seems. I work for the government."

I don't think I ever really believed the big lie, even at the beginning, but just then it was to my advantage to go along with it. He seemed to be using it as a way out, to keep me from calling the police. "Then you must have gotten into the wrong apartment," I said, turning back to my sandwich preparation.

"I guess so."

"How did you open the door?"

Another smile. "I have a way with locks."

We had our sandwiches and beer by candlelight, looking out at the darkened city. Police and emergency vehicles passed frequently on First Avenue, and after a time a giant searchlight lit the sky a mile or so away. "What's that, Nicky?" I asked.

"One of those lights they bring in for movie premieres and store openings. It uses a gasoline engine to generate its own electricity." Presently another appeared in the sky, up toward midtown.

He seemed to like hearing me talk, and I did a lot of it over the next few hours, telling him about growing up back in Ohio. All I got in return were a few vague stories about his Italian-American parents and a boyhood in Greenwich Village. Finally, before I knew it, the time was close to midnight. We'd turned on the radio again and learned that power had been restored to Coney Island. Elsewhere in the city things were going slowly. The federal government was lending what assistance it could, while investigating the remote possibility the outage had been caused by sabotage. It seemed to have begun somewhere in Canada or along the Niagara frontier in western New York.

"Well," I told Nick finally, "it looks like the power will be off most of the night. I'm going to bed. You can leave or sleep on the couch."

"How do I know you won't call the police?" he asked.

"You don't. That's why I'd suggest you leave."

He came closer in the flickering candlelight. "What a night this is. I'll bet nine months from today a million women will have babies."

"Not this one," I said, walking into the bedroom.

I closed the door but didn't lock it. Pulling back the bedspread I removed my shoes and slid under the covers fully clothed. I glanced at the phone, knowing I was an idiot not to call the police.

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Before long I heard a familiar squeak from the living room. I walked to the door and opened it. "Did you open the window?"

"I stuck my head out to see if there are any lights uptown. I can see another searchlight but that's all."

"Close it. There's no screen on that window."

"The bugs have all gone south for the winter."

"I really think you'd better go with them."

He came up close to me. "I've enjoyed the evening, Gloria. I didn't expect you to be here but I'm glad you were. Maybe we can get together some night when the lights are on."

He leaned over and kissed me lightly. I was so startled I drew back as if his lips had been a red-hot poker. Then he was gone out the door.

I locked up and went back to bed, sleeping restlessly for the remainder of the night. Somewhere around four o'clock I became aware that the power had been restored and the living room light was on, but I fell back to sleep without getting up.

I awakened around seven as I usually did, and ate breakfast watching television reports of the blackout. The day was cooler, as they'd predicted, and I went to the closet for my raincoat. That was when I noticed something missing.

The bastard had stolen my new Russian greatcoat!

For much of the morning I debated what I should do. Calling the police eighteen hours after I'd discovered Nick in my apartment might take some explaining, and to give a true account of what happened was out of the question. I'd spent half the night chatting with a burglar in the dark, serving him beer and sandwiches which we ate by candlelight. He'd even kissed me as he left. No, he hadn't been carrying the coat at the time.

In fact, I could think of only two ways he might have stolen it. Either he'd taken it earlier in the day, returning to my apartment for more loot—which was highly unlikely—or he'd dropped the coat out my window in the middle of the night, retrieving it in the dark after he left the apartment. This seemed more likely, but didn't I have anything more valuable than an inexpensive knock-off of a stylish winter coat? Why would anybody steal it in the first place?

Finally, after much soul-searching, I decided to forget calling the police. I called my insurance company instead, and promptly learned that a police report had to be filed first. In the depths of

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my frustration Samantha stopped by my cubicle. "Glad to see you survived the blackout," she said.

"Just barely. How was the play?"

"It was canceled."

"Of course! I don't have my wits about me this morning."

"I can turn in the tickets for another performance, but it'll have to be after my vacation."

I remembered she was driving to Virginia Beach with her boyfriend. "When do you leave?"

"After work on Friday. I'll be away all next week. I hope we don't get that cold weather they're predicting."

I decided to tell her about the coat. Not about Nick, just the coat. "You know, I think someone broke into my apartment yesterday. My new winter coat is gone."

"Not that red one! Did they take anything else?"

"Apparently not. I'm going over on my lunch hour to see if I can get another coat in my size."

"I hope you can. It looked good on you that one day you wore it."

"I need a winter coat of some sort."

"How did you survive the blackout?" Samantha asked.

"Fine. The neighbors all got together."

I skipped lunch and went back to the bargain shop on Seventh Avenue. The garment district streets were crowded on this sunny day and I felt certain no one but me would be worrying about a winter coat. I was wrong. When I told the clerk what I wanted she shook her head sadly. "Every one of those coats was gone by Friday. We couldn't keep them in stock. A couple of them turned up on the TV news last week and everybody wanted one. We're expecting more before Christmas, but not at that price."

"Do any other stores carry them?"

"Saks had a more expensive version but I understand they're sold out too."

I phoned Saks from the office and they confirmed that the red czarist greatcoats had been sold out for a week. The clerk suggested a different garment district shop and I called there with the same results. It seemed as if I would have to settle for something else, thanks to that thieving Nick.

The good weather held through the weekend and Samantha went off on her vacation. I thought of her that evening when I heard on TV that the new Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel had been closed by an accident most of the day. On Monday Max was

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still a bit grumpy about late proofs, but I was used to that. On Tuesday night, one week late, I finally got together with my neighbor Helen Coin to look at her handmade jewelry.

Helen was a short blond woman with a perky attitude and lots of talent. "I hope there's not another blackout this week," I told her.

"Next time I'll invite everyone in and make a party out of it," she said, laying out some of her recent pieces that I hadn't seen. Later we went out for dinner and then caught the Beatles' new film *Help!* The theater had shown a preview of *Doctor Zhivago.* Helen leaned over and whispered something about my new coat, which I'd shown her the day I bought it. After the movie I decided I should tell her about the robbery.

"That's terrible, Gloria! I thought our building was more secure than that!"

"It happened during the blackout," I murmured.

"Did you actually see this burglar?"

"I might have caught a glimpse of him."

Helen shook her head, unable to grasp it. "This isn't exactly the high-rent district. Why would anyone break in just to steal a winter coat?"

"I don't know," I admitted. It was a question that had puzzled me too. If Nick had simply wanted something of mine he could have taken a much smaller object. I was beginning to think he'd entered my apartment simply to steal the coat, but that didn't make any sense. What would a supposed government agent want with my coat?

Two days later, one week before Thanksgiving, the weather turned chilly again. I almost froze in my thin raincoat walking to work from the subway. Max Rhinegold saw me as I walked in the door. "Don't you have a winter coat for this weather, Gloria?" he asked.

"Somebody stole it," I told him. "The red one. I wore it a couple of weeks ago."

"Sure, I remember. It didn't get stolen in the office, did it?"

"No, in my apartment."

"That's a shame." He seemed to have already lost interest.

My phone was ringing as I walked in the door that evening after work. It was Helen Coin, upstairs. "Your coat's on TV," she said. "Channel Four."

I hung up and turned on the TV. A blond woman in my red coat

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was being helped into a police car, and I suddenly realized I'd seen her before. In a voice-over, the news anchorman was saying, "Mary Todd, the victim's wife, found her husband's body when she returned from a luncheon meeting. Police are baffled as to how the killer gained entrance to the building, which has a doorman on duty at all times."

They went into a commercial and I flipped channels. On Two I caught a file tape of Sam Todd being presented with an award. "Todd, a leading record producer with a string of hit albums to his credit, was believed to have been killed by a burglar. His wife Mary was near collapse after discovering the body. Todd had been working at home recently, completing a book on the current music scene."

I sat staring at the TV screen, trying to fathom what it all meant. Mary Todd had been wearing the coat again, on the first cold day since I'd seen her at lunch in Rockefeller Plaza. And her husband had been murdered. My coat, a virtual duplicate, had been stolen nine days earlier. It might mean something, but I didn't know what.

The late news that evening had more details, devoting the first ten minutes of air time to the story. One of the Channel Four anchors was shown interviewing the doorman at Todd's Park Avenue apartment building. The white-haired man, named Samuels, insisted he'd been sitting inside the front door reading the morning paper until he was relieved for his lunch break. "Mrs. Todd and a few other tenants went out but no one came in." The younger man who'd relieved him, a former city police officer named Moscowitz, was equally positive. When Mary Todd had returned from lunch with some packages around three o'clock, Samuels had asked Moscowitz to carry them up to her apartment. He'd been there when she unlocked the door and found her husband dead on the floor.

Police officials were saying very little this early in the investigation, though one source confirmed that the position of the body indicated Todd had been shot upon opening his door. That hardly sounded like a burglar to me. Even if he'd heard someone tampering with the lock and surprised a would-be burglar, it was unlikely the man would have had a gun ready to kill him. If no one else had entered the building that morning, might it have been a neighbor who fired the fatal shot?

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I puzzled about it as I dropped off to sleep that night. On Friday I picked up one of New York's tabloids on the way to the office and read some of the speculation about the killing. Sam Todd had long been rumored to be a ladies' man, actively courting young female singers in the recording business. Some wondered if a jealous boyfriend or husband might have shot him. The tabloid contained thinly veiled speculation about Mary Todd herself, reporting one rumor that Todd had been about to divorce his wife for another woman, but another report stated that he'd recently broken off the affair and returned to his wife. In the tabloid business they seemed to report every bizarre rumor they heard, letting the reader choose from among them.

Surprisingly, Max was in a grouchy mood about the Todd killing. Going over the schedules with me over coffee that morning, he confided that Neptune had been about to sign Todd to a book contract, a personal overview of the current rock scene. With the success of the Beatles and other groups he was certain it would have been a bestseller.

"I didn't know about that," I told him.

He shrugged. "We'd been working with him for months on an outline, but it was too soon for a formal announcement. Now it doesn't matter."

"Do you know his wife?"

Max Rhinegold shook his head. "I think I was introduced once, but I don't really know her."

"Who do you think killed him?" I couldn't help asking. The possibility that I or my coat was somehow involved had made it extremely important.

"If the police say a burglar, that's good enough for me."

"A burglar," I repeated, and suddenly I knew why the question was so important. The only burglar I knew was Nick and I didn't want it to be him.

That night Sam Todd's murder was still the top story on the TV news. He was one of those semi-celebrities whose real fame had come with the manner of his death. I watched the news until I couldn't take any more, then turned it off and poured myself a drink. I heard a knock at the door and guessed it would be Helen, come down to talk about the murder and my stolen coat. I opened the door without checking the peephole and Nick was standing there.

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"Oh!"

"Hello, Gloria."

I stood aside to let him enter. "Hello, Nicky."

He smiled. "Nobody calls me Nicky."

"I do."

He gave me a look through veiled eyes. "Are you going to call the police?"

"I haven't called them yet. I guess I won't start now."

"You know that I stole your coat?"

I nodded. "You dropped it out the window, didn't you? And picked it up outside."

"I swear to God I didn't know it was going to involve murder."

He was confirming my worst fears. "What kind of government agent are you, Nicky?"

"The worst kind, I'm afraid." He slipped his arms easily around me, and I didn't resist.

"Who killed Sam Todd?" I asked. "And why? And what did my coat have to do with it?"

"I can't tell you any of that. It would be dangerous for you to know."

I broke away from him. "But *you* know."

"I was paid to steal your coat, and I know who paid me."

"The government—"

"Forget the government for now. This was a private individual. People hear about me and they occasionally hire me. So long as the theft is nothing of value, I'll take it on."

I stared into his eyes. "When they want this service, who do they ask for?"

"What do you mean?"

I sighed in exasperation. "What's your name, damn it! Besides Nicky."

"Velvet," he said softly. "Nick Velvet. It used to be something longer but I shortened it."

"Do you live here in the city?"

"Just north of the Bronx, in Westchester. I have a modest house in a working-class neighborhood, and if you offered me a beer right now I'd take it."

Somehow we weren't talking about the murder of Sam Todd any longer. This man Nick Velvet had risked arrest to return to me with a sort of apology. I thought that was important to both of us.

I opened two beers.

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Samantha Rodgers returned to work on Monday morning. It was a short week because of the long Thanksgiving holiday, and we were both so loaded with work I hardly had time to ask her about Virginia Beach. "Did you have any trouble getting there?" I asked quickly between phone calls.

"No, we went straight down the Jersey Turnpike to Route Thirteen. That's the fastest way."

I told her we'd talk later. She waved and went back to her office. I'd arranged to take a late lunch hour that day, walking over to Park Avenue, to the apartment building where Sam Todd and his wife had lived. I wanted to see the doorman, Samuels, and I recognized him at once from his brief interview on TV. He was seated behind a desk with a telephone to announce visitors, his face buried in a newspaper.

"Mr. Samuels?" I said.

He lifted his face from the paper. "That's me. Who are you visiting?"

"No one. I just wanted to ask you about last week."

"Look, lady, I've talked to the police and the press about last week. I got nothing more to say."

"It's not about the people. It's about the coat."

"Huh?"

"I had a red coat stolen a few days before the killing. It's very similar to the one Mrs. Todd was wearing in the TV reports of this tragedy. I wondered if I should go to the police about it."

"I sure can't tell you that, lady." He wrinkled his newspaper impatiently.

"I just want you to answer one question. Are you sure it was Mrs. Todd who was wearing that coat?"

"Who else would it have been? We talked about the weather turning colder. Too cold, really, for the middle of November. Look, nobody gets by me unless I know them. Otherwise I announce 'em on the phone. It was Mrs. Todd both times."

Those were the words I'd been hoping for. "Both times?"

"She went out and came back in about a minute later. Just sailed past me, mumbling something about forgetting her shopping list. She left again about five minutes after that."

"Did you get a good look at her face?"

He folded the paper and put it down on the desk. "I was reading, you know, but I saw the red coat and her blond hair. That long

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scarf was wrapped around her mouth and cheeks. The wind was cold that day."

"Thank you, Mr. Samuels. You've been a great help."

Back at the office I took a sketch pad from my filing cabinet. Working from a newspaper photograph of Mary Todd, I did a quick sketch of her face, then drew another one alongside it. I sketched in the scarf on the second figure, then left the pad there when Max called me into his office.

I worked late that night, and when I finally left the office around seven I was surprised to see Samantha just leaving too. "It's hell the first day back from vacation," she muttered. "Want to stop for a drink?"

"I'd better get home, Samantha."

"I'll walk you to the subway."

I laughed. "You live uptown, remember?"

She crowded close to me as a couple of businessmen hurried by, headed for Grand Central. "I saw those sketches on your pad," she said into my ear. I felt a chill down to my toes.

"I thought you would. That's why I left it on top of the desk."

We'd reached the corner of Park Avenue, where the southbound traffic was moving fast. "How did you know it was me?" she asked.

"I was hoping with all my heart that it wasn't."

She tried to shove me then, into the lane of speeding traffic. I don't know what happened next. I closed my eyes and heard her scream. Sometimes even now I still hear that scream.

And then from out of nowhere Nick Velvet was holding me, pulling me away from the curb, letting the gathering crowd wall us out from the scene in the street.

Back at my apartment, he held me for a long time. Once I asked him, "What happened back there?"

"She slipped off the curb. That's all you need to know."

"Samantha." I still couldn't believe what had happened. "She was one of my closest friends here."

He got a couple of beers from the refrigerator. "How did you know? I was very careful not to tell you who hired me."

Instead of answering immediately, I asked, "Why were you following me?"

"I was waiting for you outside the office. When I saw Samantha with you I followed along to make sure you were safe. She tried to push you in front of a taxi."

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"Did you—?"

He hushed my lips with his fingers. "It doesn't matter what I did. You're alive and unharmed, and that's what matters. Now tell me how you knew."

"Well, you more or less confirmed that the killer had worn my coat, and that you'd been hired to steal it. That told me the killer must have seen my coat, and I started counting the people who qualified. It told me also that the killer was most likely a woman. What woman? A clerk in the store where I'd bought the coat? No, because they could have gotten their own off the rack. Someone in my apartment building? My friend Helen Coin saw the coat and she's blond like Mary Todd, but she's also short. A coat that long on her would have dragged on the floor. Women on the street or in the Rockefeller Plaza restaurant where I had lunch with Samantha wouldn't have known my name or where I lived. You knew both of those things. It narrowed down in my mind to someone at my office. I knew Samantha had seen the coat because we lunched together that day. In fact, I told her the store where I'd bought it. She not only saw me in the coat but she saw Mary Todd in her virtually identical coat at the same time. She saw both coats together and that was what gave her the idea. She must have discovered the stores were sold out of the coat and she had to hire you—"

"That part isn't important," he insisted. "Go on."

"How much did she pay you for this?"

"A small amount. I should have charged her much more."

I could see he was uncomfortable with the subject and I went on. "I knew she had a boyfriend she was pretty secretive about. Sometimes he'd buy them show tickets and have to cancel their date. That's when I got to go in his place. She had tickets she'd probably bought herself for the night you robbed me, and she suggested dinner first. You were surprised when I walked in and caught you, just before the blackout, because she was supposed to keep me occupied. As it was, I came home early and caught you in the act."

"How could Samantha even know Sam Todd?"

"That's easy. My boss, Max Rhinegold, told me he was close to signing Todd for a book on the rock music scene. Such a book was mentioned on one of the TV reports. Max told me 'we'd' been working with Todd on an outline for some months. When he said 'we' it could only have meant Samantha and him. She worked most closely with Max. Samantha met Todd on the book project and

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they had an affair. It probably meant nothing to Todd, but when he broke it off Samantha wanted to kill him. And she did. She hired you to steal my coat and pretended to go on vacation to Virginia Beach. Only the tunnel-bridge across the mouth of Chesapeake Bay was closed by an accident that day and she knew nothing about it. She told me they'd driven down that way, on Route Thirteen, which had to be a lie. She stayed in the city that whole week, waiting for the predicted cold weather, for a day cold enough to bring out Mary Todd's red coat again. Finally it came, as she knew it would. Otherwise, I imagine she'd have stretched her vacation by calling in sick."

"She was a bit taller than you, and a brunette, not a blonde like Mary Todd."

"The difference in coat length wouldn't be noticed, and a wig would fix the hair color. She was waiting nearby in my red coat and scarf, watching the building until she saw Mary leave. The doorman barely looked up from his paper when she dashed in and then went out again. She shot Todd as soon as he opened the door, perhaps muffling the sound with my wool scarf."

"And this afternoon?"

"I made some sketches of their two faces side by side on my pad, then left it on my desk. I knew she'd see it because she was always in my office. I didn't know she'd try to kill me, though."

We talked and drank beer for a long time after that. The next morning he asked me to move in with him, to share a crazy life in which he'd often be away. I said no, not yet.

For Christmas Nicky bought me a new red coat and took me to see *Doctor Zhivago*. I moved in with him two days later.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Hoch chose to return to Nick Velvet for his anniversary issue because it was a Nick Velvet story that kicked off his 25-year run in *EQMM*. Velvet is also the most popular of his nearly two-dozen series characters. Of interest to longtime fans: Mr. Hoch's first published story, in *Famous Detective Stories* (1955), featured Simon Ark, who now appears in *EQMM*.

Edward D. Hoch

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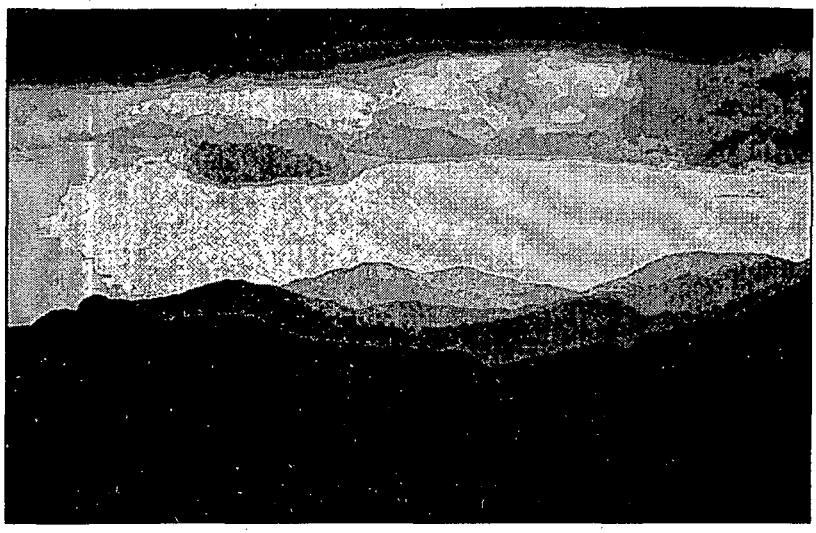

BECAUSE IT WAS THERE

by Peter Lovesey

They are dead now, all three. Professor Patrick Storm, the last of them, went in August, aged eighty-two. Of pneumonia. The obituary writers gave him the send-off he deserved, crediting him with the inspiration and the dynamism that got the new theatre built at Cambridge. The tributes were blessedly free of the snide remarks that are almost obligatory two-thirds of the way into most of the obits you read—"not over-concerned about the state of his dress" or "borrowing from friends was an art he brought to perfection." No such smears for Patrick Storm. He was a decent man, through and through. A murderer, yes, but decent.

The press knew nothing about the murder. I don't think anyone knew of it except me. Patrick amazed me with it over supper in his rooms a couple of years ago. He wanted the facts made public at the proper time, and asked me to take on the task. I promised to wait until six months after he was gone.

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This is the story. About January, 1975, when he had turned sixty, he received a phone call. A voice he had not heard in almost forty years, so it was not surprising he was slow to cotton on. The words made a lasting impression; he gave me the conversation verbatim. I have it on tape, and I'll reproduce it here.

"Professor Storm?"

"Yes."

"Patrick Storm?"

"Yes."

"Pat, late of Caius College?"

"'Late' is the operative word," said Patrick. "I was there as an undergraduate in the nineteen thirties."

Peter Lovesey's latest story for *EQMM* is a cleverly plotted, ironic, non-series tale. (British readers will also be able to find it in the latest anthology from the Crime Writers Association.) Readers who enjoyed Mr. Lovesey's earlier stories for *EQMM* featuring dour police detective Peter Diamond may want to try his new novel in the Diamond series, *Upon a Dark Night* (Mysterious Press/April 1998). ¶

"You don't have to tell me, old boy. Remember Simon Brown?"

"To be perfectly frank, no." He didn't care much for that over-familiar "old boy."

"Well, you wouldn't," the voice at the end of the line said in the same confident manner. "I had a nickname in those days. You would have known me as 'Cape'—short for 'Capability.' Does it ring a bell now?"

Patrick Storm had not cast his thoughts so far back in many years. So much had happened since, to the world, and to himself. The thirties were another age. Faintly a bell did chime in his brain. "Cape, you say. Are you a Caius man yourself?"

"The Alpine Club."

"Oh, that." Patrick had done some climbing in his second year at Cambridge. Not much. He hadn't got to the Alps. The Welsh Mountains on various weekends. He didn't remember much else. So "Cape" Brown had been one of the Alpine Club people. "It's coming back to me. Didn't you and I walk the Snowdon Horseshoe together, with another fellow, one Easter?"

"Climbed, old boy. Climbed. We weren't a walking club. The other chap was Ben Tattersall, who is now the Bishop of

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Westbury, would you believe?"

"Is he, by Jove?"

"You remember Ben, then?"

"Certainly, I remember Ben," said Patrick in a tone suggesting that some people had more right to be remembered than others.

Cape Brown said, "You wouldn't have thought he'd make it to bishop, not the Ben Tattersall I remember, telling his dirty joke about the parrot."

"I don't remember that."

"The parrot who worked for the bus conductor."

"Oh yes," said Patrick, pretending he remembered, not wanting to prolong this. "What prompted you to call me?"

"Old time's sake. It's coming up to forty years since we asked some stranger to take that black and white snapshot with Ben's box Brownie on the summit of Snowdon. April first, nineteen thirty-six."

"As long ago as that?"

"You, me, and Ben, bless him."

"If what you say is right, he can bless us," Patrick heard himself quip.

Cape Brown chuckled. "You haven't lost your sense of humour, Prof. Might have lost all your other faculties—"

"Hold on," said Patrick. "I'm not *that* decrepit."

"That's good, because I was taking a risk, calling you up after so long. You could have had a heart condition, or chronic asthma."

"I've been fortunate."

"Looked after yourself, I'm sure?"

"Tried to stay fit, yes."

"Excellent. And you're not planning a trip to the Antipodes this April? You're game for the climb?"

"The what?"

"The commemorative climb. 'Walk,' if you insist. Don't you remember? Standing on the top of Snowdon, we pledged to come back and do it again in another forty years. The first suggestion was fifty, but we modified it. Three old blokes of seventy might find it difficult slogging up four mountain peaks."

Patrick had no memory of such a pledge, and said so. He had only the faintest recollection of standing on Snowdon in a thick mist.

"Ben didn't remember either when I phoned him just now, but he doesn't disbelieve me."

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"I'm not saying I disbelieve you. . . ."

"That's all right, then. Ben has all kinds of duties for the Church, but Easter is late this year, and April first happens to fall on a Thursday, so he thinks he can clear his diary that day. He's reasonably fit, he tells me. Does a fair bit of fell walking in the summer. You'll join us on the big day, won't you?"

It would have been churlish to refuse when the bishop was going to so much trouble. Patrick said he would consult his diary, knowing already that the first week in April was clear. "Where are you suggesting we meet—if I can get there?"

A less decent man would have made an excuse.

April first, 1976, in the car park at Pen-y-pass. The three sixty-year-olds faced each other, ready for the challenge. "*We* may have deteriorated in forty years, but the equipment has improved, thank God," Cape Brown remarked when the first handshakes were done.

Ben the bishop allowed the Almighty's name to pass without objection. "I think I was wearing army boots from one of those surplus stores," he said. He looked every inch the fell-walker in his bright blue padded jacket and trousers and red climbing boots. Patrick remembered him clearly now, and he hadn't altered much. More hair than any of them, and still more black than silver.

If the weather was favourable, the plan was to walk the entire Horseshoe, exactly as they had in 1936. A demanding route that each of them now felt committed to try. And a sky of Cambridge blue left them no last-minute get-out. There was snow on the heights, but most of the going would be safe enough.

"Just before we start, I'd like you to meet someone," Cape said. "She's waiting in the car."

"She?" said Patrick, surprised. He had no memory of women in the Alpine Club.

"Your wife?" said the bishop.

Patrick could not imagine why a wife should be on the trip. What was she going to do while they walked the Horseshoe? Sit in the car?

"A friend. Come and meet her."

She was introduced as Linda, and she was dressed for climbing, down to the gaiters and boots. However, she was far too young to have been at Cambridge before the war. "You don't mind if Linda

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films us doing bits of our epic?" Cape said. "She won't get in our way."

"She has a cine-camera with her?" said the bishop.

"You'll see."

Linda, dark-haired and with an air of competence that would have seemed brash in the young women of the nineteen thirties, opened the boot of the car and took out a professional-looking movie camera and folding tripod.

"I didn't know you had this in mind," Patrick said confidentially to Cape Brown.

"I thought it was just the three of us," the bishop chimed in. "Three men."

"Don't fret. She'll keep her distance, Ben. Just pretend she isn't there. How do you think they film those climbs on television? Someone is holding a camera, but you never see him. We're the stars, you see. Linda is just recording the event. And she's a bloody good climber, or she wouldn't be here."

In the circumstances it was difficult to object. Nobody wanted to start the walk with an argument. They set off on the first stage, up the Miners' Track towards Bwlch y Moch, with Cape Brown stepping out briskly between the blue-black slate rocks and over the slabs that bridged the streams. Linda, carrying her camera, followed some twenty yards behind, as if under instructions not to distract the threesome on their nostalgic trip.

They paused on Bwlch y Moch, the Pass of the Pigs. Below, Llyn Llydaw had a film of ice that the sun had yet to touch. They hadn't seen a soul until now, but there were two climbers on the coal-black cliff across the lake. "Lliwedd," said the bishop. "I remember scaling that with the Alpine Club."

"Me, too," said Cape. "Wouldn't want to try it at my age. Shall we move on, gentlemen?"

The path leading off to the right was the official start of the Horseshoe. Crib Goch, the first of the four peaks, was going to be demanding as they got closer to the snow line. Towards the top it would need some work with the hands, steadying and pulling.

Once or twice Patrick Storm looked back to see how Linda was coping. She had the camera slung on her back and was making light work of the steep ascent.

After twenty minutes, weaving upwards through the first patches of snow, breathing more rapidly, Pat Storm was beginning to wonder if he would complete this adventure. His legs

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ached, as he would have expected, but his chest ached as well and he felt colder than he should have. He glanced at his companions and drew some comfort from their appearance. The bishop was exhaling white plumes and wheezing a little, and Cape Brown seemed to be moving as if his feet hurt. He had given up making the pace. Patrick realised that he himself had become the leader. Aware of this, he stopped at the next reasonably level point. The others needed no persuading to stop as well. They all found rocks to sit on.

"In the old days, I'd have said this was a cigarette stop," Patrick said. "Time out to admire the view. I'm afraid it's necessity now."

The bishop nodded. He looked too puffed to speak.

Cape said, "We set off too fast. My fault."

They spent a few minutes recovering. Each knew that after they reached the summit of Crib Goch, the most challenging section of the whole walk lay ahead, a razor-edged ridge with a sheer drop either side, leading out to the second peak, Crib-y-Ddysgl.

Presently a cloud passed across and blotted out the sun. The cold began to be more of a problem than the fatigue, so they went on, with Patrick leading, thinking what an idiot he had been to agree to this.

Unexpectedly Cape said, "Tell us a joke, Ben. We need one of your jokes to lift morale."

The bishop managed an indulgent smile and said nothing.

Cape moved shoulder to shoulder with him. "Come on. Don't be coy. Nobody tells a dirty joke better than you."

Patrick called across, "We're not undergraduates, Cape. Ben is a bishop now."

"So what? He's a human being. You and I aren't going to think any the worse of him if he makes us smile. He isn't leading the congregation now. He's on a sentimental walk with his old oppos. Up here, he can say what he bloody well likes."

They toiled up the slope with their private thoughts. Climbing did encourage a feeling of comradeship, a sense that they were insulated from the real world, temporarily freed from the constraints of their jobs.

Cape would not leave it. "The one that always cracked me up was the bus conductor and the parrot. Remember that one, Ben?"

The bishop didn't answer.

Cape persisted, "I can't tell it like you can. I always get the punch line wrong. This bus conductor was on a route through Lon-

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don that took him to Peckham via St. Paul's and Turnham Green. He got fed up with calling out to people, 'This one for Peckham, St. Paul's, and Turnham Green.'"

"No," said Ben unexpectedly. "You're telling it wrong. He was fed up with shouting, 'This one for St. Paul's, Turnham Green, and Peckham.'"

"Right," said Cape. "I can't tell them like you can. So what happened next? He bought a parrot."

The bishop said in a monotone, as if chanting the liturgy, "He bought a parrot and taught it to speak the words for him. And the parrot said the thing perfectly. Until one day it got in a muddle, and said, 'Bang your balls on St. Paul's, Turnham Green, and Peckham.'"

Cape Brown made the mountainside echo with laughter and Patrick felt compelled to laugh too, just so that it didn't appear he disapproved. The joke was at the level of a junior school of forty years ago. Odd, really, that a bishop should have retained it all this time, but then not many risqué jokes are told to bishops.

Ben Tattersall's face was already pink from the effort of the climb. Now it had turned puce. He took a quick glance over his shoulder. Fortunately Linda and her camera were well in the rear.

The cloud passed by them, giving a stunning view of the Glyders on their right.

Scrambling up the last steep stretch, they reached the summit of Crib Goch in sunshine. Ahead, the mighty expanse of Snowdon was revealed, much of it gleaming white. Cape Brown unwrapped some chocolate and divided it into three.

"Shouldn't we offer some to your friend Linda?" Patrick asked.

"She's not my friend, old boy. She's just doing a job."

And when Linda caught up, she did her job, circling them slowly with the camera, saying nothing.

"So what's the world of academia like?" Cape asked Patrick, when the filming was done and they were resting, trying not to be intimidated by the prospect of the next half-hour. "At each other's throats most of the time, are you?"

"It is competitive at times," Patrick confirmed.

"And is it still a fact that a pretty woman can get a first if she's willing to go to bed with the prof?"

"In my case, definitely not."

"A *clever* woman, then."

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"A clever woman gets her first by right," Patrick pointed out.

"The clever ones don't always have the confidence in their ability," said Cape. "They can be looking for another guarantee."

"I won't say it hasn't happened."

"We're all ears, aren't we, Ben?" said Cape.

The bishop gave a shrug. He was staring out at the black cliffs of Lliwedd. He'd looked increasingly unhappy since finishing the joke about the parrot.

Patrick sympathised. Out of support for the wretched man, he felt an urge to be indiscreet himself, to share in the impropriety up there on the mountain. "There *was* a student a few years ago," he said. "Quite a few years, I ought to say. She was very ambitious not merely to get a first, which was practically guaranteed because she was so brilliant, but to beat the other high flyers to a research scholarship."

"And she gave you the come-on?" said Cape.

"I knew what she was up to, naturally, but it still surprised me somewhat. This was in the nineteen fifties, before casual sex became commonplace. One summer afternoon in my rooms in college, I yielded to temptation."

"And she got her scholarship?"

"She did. She went on to get a doctorate, and she is now a government minister." He named her.

"That's hot news, Pat," said Cape. "What was she like in bed—playful?"

"All this is in confidence," said Patrick. He looked across at Linda, and she was filming the view, too far away to have heard. "It was terrific. She was incredibly eager."

"You heard that, Ben?" said Cape. "The minister bangs like the shithouse door in a gale. Don't go spreading it around the clergy."

Ben Tattersall was hunched in embarrassment.

Patrick felt a surge of anger. The whole point of his story had been to take the heat off Ben. "How about you, Cape? Ben and I have been very candid. We haven't heard much from you—about yourself, I mean."

"You want the dirt on me? That's rich."

"Why?"

"Ironic, then. Fine, I can be as frank as you fellows, if it keeps the party going. You may not have seen me in forty years, but I'll bet you've seen my work on television. Have you watched *The Disher?*"

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"The what?"

"*The Disher*. The series that dishes the dirt on the rich and famous. It's mine. I'm the Disher. As you know if you watch it, my voice isn't used at all. You have to be so careful with the law. No, my subjects condemn themselves out of their own mouths, or the camera does it, or one of their so-called friends."

Patrick was too startled to comment.

The bishop said, "I don't get much time for television."

"Make some time about the end of February. You'll be on my programme telling the one about the parrot."

The bishop twitched and looked appalled.

"I mean it, Ben. That's my job."

Patrick said, "Remember what day it is. He's having us on, Ben. She didn't film us when you were telling the joke. I checked."

Cape said, "But you didn't check the sound equipment in my rucksack. It's all on tape. The parrot joke. And your sexy-minister story, Pat. We don't expect you to talk to the camera when you spill the beans. We tape it and use the voice-over. A long shot of us trekking up the mountain, and your voices dishing yourselves. Very effective."

"Let's see this tape recorder."

Cape shook his head. "At this minute, you don't know if I'm kidding or not. I'd be an idiot to confirm it, specially up here. But I warn you, gentlemen, if you try anything physical, Linda is under instructions to get it on film."

"He's bluffing," Patrick told the bishop. "He probably sells used cars for a living."

Ben Tattersall was on his feet. "There's a way of finding out. I'm going to ask the young woman. Where is she?"

Cape said, "She went ahead, to film us crossing the ridge."

It was becoming misty up there, with another cloud drifting in, and Linda was no longer in view.

"This will soon blow across," Cape said. "We can safely move on. Then you can ask Linda whatever you like." His calm manner was reassuring.

The others followed.

Curiously enough, the snow was not a handicap on this notorious ridge. It was of a soft consistency that provided good footholds and actually gave support. Had the night before been a few degrees colder, the frozen surface would have made the near-vertical edges a real hazard.

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The mist obscured the view ahead, which was a pity, because the rock pinnacles and buttresses are spectacular, but Patrick was secretly relieved that he was unable to see how exposed this razor edge was. He kept his eyes on the footprints Cape had made, while his thoughts dwelt on his own foolishness. What had induced him to speak out as he had, he could not think. To a degree, certainly, it was out of sympathy for Ben Tattersall after that mortifyingly juvenile joke. There was also, he had to admit, some bravado, the chance to boast that a university professor's life was not without its moments. And there was the daft illusion that this expedition somehow recaptured lost youth, with its lusts and energy and aspirations.

I must be getting senile, he thought. If it really does get out, what I told the other two, the tabloid press will be onto her like jackals.

He had never heard of this television programme Cape claimed to work for. But in truth he didn't watch much television these days. He preferred listening to music. So it might conceivably exist. Some of the things he had seen from time to time were blatant invasions of people's privacy.

No, the balance of probability was that Cape was playing some puerile All Fools' Day joke. The man had a warped sense of humour, no question.

On the other hand, a programme as unpleasant as *The Disher*—if it existed—must have been devised by someone with a warped sense of humour.

"It goes out late at night on ITV," Ben Tattersall, close behind him, said, as if reading Patrick's thoughts. "I've never seen it, but a Master of Foxhounds I know was on it. He resigned because of it."

"It's real?"

Cape Brown, out ahead, turned and said, "Of course it's real, suckers. You don't think I was shooting a line?"

In turning, he lost balance for a moment and was forced to grab the edge of a rock while his feet flailed across the snow.

"Hold on, man," said Patrick, moving rapidly to give assistance. He grabbed the shoulder strap of Cape's rucksack. Ben Tattersall was at his side and between them they hauled him closer to the rock.

In doing so, they disturbed the flap of his rucksack. Out of the

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top fell a sponge-covered microphone attached to a lead. It swung against his thigh.

Patrick stared in horror and looked into Ben Tattersall's eyes. Despair was etched in them.

"Look away."

"What?" said the bishop.

"Look away."

Impulse it was not. These things always appear to happen in slow motion. Patrick had ample time to make his decision. He put a boot against Cape Brown's armpit and pushed with his leg. The fingers clutching the rock could not hold the grip. Cape let go and plunged downwards, out of sight, through the mist. He made no sound.

"He lost his grip," Patrick said to Ben Tattersall. "He lost his grip and fell."

Nobody else had witnessed the incident. Linda was far ahead, her view obscured by the mist.

Cape Brown's body was recovered the same afternoon. Multiple injuries had killed him. The sound equipment in his rucksack was smashed to pieces.

Each of them appeared as a witness at the inquest. Each said that Cape lost his grip before they could reach him. After giving evidence, they didn't speak to each other. They never met again. Ben Tattersall died prematurely of cancer two years later, and was given a funeral attended by more than twenty fellow bishops and presided over by an archbishop.

Patrick lived on until this year, having, as I explained, confessed to me that he had killed Cape Brown. He need not have spoken about it. How typical of him to want the truth made public.

And there is something else I must make clear. As Patrick explained it to me, his story about the minister offering to sleep with him to earn her scholarship was pure fabrication. Nothing of the sort happened. "I made it up," he said. "You see, I had to think of something worse than a bishop telling a dirty joke, just to spare him all that embarrassment. After I'd concocted the story, I knew if it went on television everyone would believe it was true. People *want* to believe in scandals. Her career would have been ruined, quite unjustifiably. So you can imagine how I felt when I saw that microphone fall out of the rucksack."

You must agree he was a decent man. ●

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WORDS OF WARNING

by William Bankier

There was the whispering again. It was loud enough to wake Sylvia up. She could not make out the words, although the sibilant lisping seemed to be right there with her in the darkened room.

She squinted at the numbers on the illuminated clock. Ten minutes after two; disturbed sleep again! She could not afford to call in sick for the third time this term. Time absent was part of the reason she had been dismissed from the school in Montreal. Here in Baytown, she was hoping to make a fresh start.

William Bankier has been writing for *EQMM* for more than thirty years and he is an author of whom we can wholeheartedly say, he just keeps getting better and better. Although he frequently, as here, uses as his setting his imaginary "Baytown," his stories are always fresh due to the unusual way in which he views human relationships. ¶

Sylvia tried concentrating on Morgan Fender. The dark eyes, the thick black hair that lofted up into wings, the high cheekbones, the goatee beard . . . his handsome face could become diabolical. Morgan sank his teeth into her neck, which caused Sylvia to moan with pain and pleasure.

At least the whispering stopped.

Pine Street School was only a ten-minute walk from the apartment building. Morgan Fender was loitering on the sidewalk, briefcase in hand, when Sylvia emerged from the lobby into bright autumn sunlight. She noticed a fleck of blood at the corner of his mouth.

He observed her concern. "Cut myself shaving," he said. The phys-ed teacher licked a finger and dabbed the stain away. "You look frazzled."

"Trouble sleeping. Could be the change of seasons." Autumn had

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always been a difficult time for Sylvia. She believed it had to do with the decreasing angle of the sun.

"Could be failure to telephone me when you feel lonely."

"You're a nice man, Morgan." Wasn't he nice? First morning of the new term, both of them strangers at the school, had he not turned to her when she entered the common room and offered her the cup of coffee he had just made for himself? "But I'm still shy."

"If the Board of Education doesn't want us to fraternize, why do they direct new staff to this apartment building? Why did they arrange a reduction in rent?"

The children were in a good mood this morning. In response to her routine question, they told their teacher that they had eaten breakfast. They had brushed their teeth.

"And most important . . . ?"

"Yes, Miss Barnes," they chorused. "We told our parents we love them."

"This is composition day."

"Again? We wrote a composition yesterday."

"Composition days are frequent and unpredictable." Sylvia went to the blackboard, picked up chalk, and wrote large: "The evil that men do lives after them."

"There is your theme." She spoke it aloud. "Who said that?"

"You just did."

"Very funny. It was William Shakespeare. The play is *Julius Caesar*. The speaker, Marc Anthony. The conspirators had used sharp knives to slaughter their emperor." Sylvia thought of the blood beside Morgan's mouth. She was close enough to the window to see the playing fields. Morgan was out there clapping his hands while a class of heavy-footed youngsters slogged around the track.

"Miss Barnes?"

"Yes?"

"Should we begin?"

"Of course. I thought you already had."

The telephone was ringing as Sylvia let herself into her apartment. She ran to pick it up. "Hello?"

"This is Stanley Ramsforth speaking, from the CBC in Toronto. Are you Ms. Carmelita Hope?"

It was so sudden, Sylvia was not ready. She had expected a letter, not a telephone call. "No, I'm sorry. She's not here."

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"When would I be able to reach her?"

"She comes and goes. Carmelita might show up at any time."

"Tell her I received her letter and was intrigued. Tell her I'm checked in at the Coronet Hotel. I had to be here to scout a location so I thought I'd touch base with Ms. Hope as well."

Sylvia's heart was pounding when she put down the telephone. The carbon copy of Carmelita's letter lay on her desk beside the portable typewriter. She picked it up and held it to the fading light from the window.

Dear Mr. Ramsforth:

How I do admire your series on CBC television, *Love Hurts*. Those who call it a soap opera fail to understand its depth.

I am an actress, newly arrived from South America. I am young and, yes, beautiful. Otherwise I would not have the courage to write to you. Without fear, shamelessly, I strip myself naked, exposing my brash desire. I want to act in your production! I will do anything to achieve my goal!

Please grant an ambitious young woman an interview. You will not be disappointed. Invite me to Toronto. Let me buy you a lunch you will never forget.

Yours in anticipation, Carmelita Hope (Miss).

Sylvia set the letter down and began to pace the darkening room. Carmelita's expectation had been that she would travel to the city, where she would be a total stranger. But now, here was Mr. Ramsforth at the hotel on Front Street. What could she do now? What would Carmelita do?

Stanley Ramsforth stood at the hotel room window. He looked out across the street at the town clock in its mock-gothic tower. In gathering darkness, its face glowed with a pale, sick light.

The producer wondered if he had been foolish to drive here in response to the woman's letter. The distance was only a hundred miles, less than three hours on the highway. And he had the excuse of scouting locations for an upcoming episode of the series.

He turned from the window and stretched himself on the bed. The old springs made comic music under him. Ramsforth knew that his colleagues referred to him as "C.C." and that the initials stood for "Casting Couch." But there was no great shame in it. He was a randy guy at age fifty, and still interested in every woman

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who swam into his ken. The Corporation didn't care. They wanted good programs that drew large audiences. He gave them that.

The fact that the letter-writer was not home was disappointing. He could have used her here and now. The woman answering the telephone seemed vague. Stanley Ramsforth drifted into a pleasant half-sleep until the town clock sounded the hour.

Jolted awake, he said, "That settles one thing. I am not spending two nights in this town. You could die of a heart attack."

Then the telephone rang.

Sylvia took deep breaths to keep her voice from trembling. It was a stage device taught to her by Carmelita. "Mr. Ramsforth, this is Sylvia Barnes. We spoke earlier."

"I remember."

"I've been thinking about my friend, Carmelita Hope. There are some things about her you ought to know."

"I'm listening."

"I can't discuss it on the telephone. I wonder if we could meet somewhere."

"Of course. I was about to have dinner. I hate eating by myself. Perhaps you would give me the pleasure of your company."

"Well, I didn't expect . . . I'm not sure if I . . ."

"Good. Meet me in the lobby of the Coronet Hotel in one hour. I hear this decrepit place has an excellent kitchen."

The Coronet Hotel dining room was not crowded. The CBC producer, tall and boxlike in a three-piece double-breasted grey suit, loomed over the petite woman with her braided and coiled yellow hair and her schoolgirl cardigan and flat shoes. It had been a fine roast beef dinner and conversation had flowed easily. She was not unattractive, Ramsforth decided, for all her mousey innocent presentation. Her words of caution about Carmelita Hope had turned out to be not much of anything. The South American actress was not dependable; that was the size of it.

"What you must do now, Sylvia," he said after the check was paid and they were moving back into the lobby, "is help me with my location search."

"If I can."

"I need to find a quiet country road. It should have some sort of deserted outbuilding on it. A barn, a shed. An abandoned cottage. This is for a scene in a future episode of *Love Hurts.*"

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Sylvia knew of such a place. "The old Conroy farm is like that," she said. "The family moved away after the father died. It's not far—just across the bay in Prince Edward County."

They drove there in half an hour in Ramsforth's rented car. The sun had set hours ago. The headlights illuminated a frame cottage as the car bumped along a rutted lane. There was an air of sad mystery to the building with its blind windows and sagging porch.

"It looks suitably atmospheric," Ramsforth said, braking and killing the engine. He took a flashlight from the glove compartment. "Let's give it closer inspection."

He took her arm to guide her across rough ground. The wooden steps creaked as they mounted the porch. He shone his light around: webs in corners, a screen door off one hinge, a glider-swing with plastic upholstery on a rusted frame.

"This should do nicely," Ramsforth said.

"It spooks me." Sylvia shivered.

"Poor thing, you're cold."

"I'm all right." She moved away from his encircling arm.

He laughed. "Sylvia, try to understand something. You don't do anything to sell yourself. But you are an attractive woman just the same. We've been together now for three hours and ten minutes. I, for one, have enjoyed our time together."

"It's been very nice. Thank you."

"Certain situations demand certain actions. I'm a theatrical man, I understand these things. And this time and place call for, at the very least, a kiss."

"Oh, well." It was a kind of moan.

He put his arms around her. She could do nothing but raise her face. He sought and found her lips in the darkness. His tongue forced its way inside her mouth. She had always hated this kind of kissing. It seemed unhygienic and disgusting.

"Don't." She struggled free. "Just don't!"

He laughed again, a short one this time, without humor. "If that's the way you feel. My life does not depend on it."

"Could we drive back now?"

"Anything you say."

Lying in bed, unable to sleep, Morgan Fender heard a car drive up and stop outside the building, leaving its engine running. He heard a door open, he heard Sylvia's voice saying a hurried good night. The car door slammed, the vehicle sped away.

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In the comparative silence that followed, he could hear Sylvia's key in the front door lock. She was talking to herself, but he could not make out the words. She sounded desperate.

Sylvia brushed her teeth twice. She got into bed, pulled the covers to her chin and held them with a clenched fist. Her knees almost touched her chest, but still her feet felt vulnerable. She must have slept because there was the clock registering half past one.

And there were the whispering voices. The sound was louder this time. Could she be hearing neighbours on the other side of the bedroom wall? No, that apartment was vacant. She had seen a painting crew in there the other day. Sylvia began to feel angry. It was too much, having her sleep disturbed night after night.

She got out of bed and switched on the overhead light. The sound seemed to be coming from the closet where she hung her clothes. She went there and slid open the door. The garments were complaining! She could hear them now, loud and clear!

It was a litany of condemnation. They had been worn too often. The blue shirt had a button missing. She was using the wrong rinse. The wrong drying cycle. They were mad as hell and they were not going to put up with it any longer. Only the clothes at the end of the rail, the ones Carmelita left here for her occasional visits, were silent: the red silk-jersey dress with its short skirt, the drawstring peasant blouse, and the paisley waistcoat.

All right, she would let them have their way. Moving with sullen determination, Sylvia put on dressing gown and slippers, found the plastic basket in the hall closet, loaded into it the mutinous clothing, topped the pile with the plastic bottle of detergent, found her change purse, grabbed her keys, and let herself out into the deserted corridor of the sleeping building.

The laundry room was down a flight of stairs at the end of the floor. There was reassurance in the gleaming white washers and dryers. Feeling better, she loaded a machine, poured in the detergent, adjusted the setting, clicked four quarters into the slots, and got the system going. Then she hoisted herself onto the table used for folding and began watching the machine obediently.

That was when Morgan Fender strode into the little room, dressed in jeans and unbuttoned shirt, his feet bare, his hair tousled. "Oh, it's you." His glare softened. "Last wash is supposed to be ten-thirty." He indicated a sign on the wall. "My bedroom is directly above this ceiling."

"I'm sorry. It was compulsive."

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"I know the feeling." He found a place to sit beside her.

"You're a good man, Morgan."

"Not everybody would agree with you."

"You're kind to me."

"I like you."

"I met a man this morning. He's from Toronto. He's staying at the Coronet Hotel. Stanley Ramsforth, the CBC producer. He seemed all right at first."

"One of those," the gym teacher said.

"I hope he leaves me alone."

"Want me to have a word with him?"

"No, don't."

The washing machine switched cycles. They watched it while it settled into a new rhythm. Then Morgan Fender continued, "Men can fool you. It's tough to be a man."

"It's not easy to be a woman."

"It's not the same. Women can be a pain in the neck. But their behaviour comes from positive motivations. Women are moved to create a safe environment for children to grow up in. And to bear those children. Men are involved in those things, too. But only partly. Men want to chase and kill. To destroy the opposition. Society has evolved while men, under the surface, have not."

"I never knew you were wise, Morgan."

"At least I know what I am. I'm a control freak. I push people around. Not physically."

"I think you're a lamb."

"Tell them that in Kirkland Lake."

"Oh?"

"My previous school. I was practically drummed out. These lazy boys, these couch potatoes, I made them work hard in the gym. One day last year, a kid collapsed and died doing pushups. Wilson, Jerry. He had a bad heart. No previous indication. I was suspended. Encouraged to leave town."

"It was not your fault."

The machine stopped. As Sylvia got off the table to shift clothes into the dryer, Morgan said, "Tell me more about this Ramsforth character."

The following day, Morgan walked by Sylvia's classroom and looked in. The substitute teacher was in charge yet again. He went to one of the pay telephones and dialed Sylvia's number. There was

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no reply. After a moment's thought, on an impulse, he dialed Information and obtained the number of the Coronet Hotel. Yes, there was a Mr. Ramsforth staying there. He was put through.

"Ramsforth here."

"My name is Fender. You don't know me but I'm a friend of Sylvia Barnes."

"Oh yes?" The producer sounded on guard.

"I really need to talk to you. It's important."

"I'm out all day. Earliest you can see me is six o'clock."

"Can I come by at six?"

"I'll expect you. Can't you tell me what this is about?"

"Better if I see you."

At three-thirty, Fender had the senior team on the field for football practice. By five, he sent them to the showers. At five-fifteen, he had walked down the hill and was in the Coronet beverage room with plenty of time for a couple of beers. At six, he presented himself at the desk in the lobby. The youth on duty looked not much older than the kids he had been watching on the practice field. Mr. Ramsforth was in Room 217. Dutifully, the young man called the room and was assured the visitor could come up.

Stanley Ramsforth opened the door with a flourish. "Mr. Fender, sir. How good of you to come." He stood back and bowed Fender into the room.

Expecting the older man to be on the defensive, Fender was somewhat taken aback. He sat in the upholstered chair by the window while his host poured two drinks from a bottle on the dresser. At the same time, the producer talked steadily.

"You and I have something in common. We both know and admire Sylvia Barnes. There is a lady, sweet and kind. She had dinner with me the other night, I suppose you know that. And then, out of the goodness of her heart, she took me on a tour of abandoned cottages. That's what I'm doing here, finding locations for filming. Cheers, Mr. Fender."

After a theatrical clink of glasses, the gym teacher drank. "I got a feeling she was upset by the experience."

"Indeed she was. The deserted buildings destroyed her mood. She is moody, I'm sure you've noticed. I told myself, this woman has a vivid imagination. And they were depressing, these houses which once echoed with the sounds of family life. Who knows what dreams of unreality they might stir up in so sensitive a person as our Sylvia?"

The phone rang. Ramsforth picked it up. "A young lady? What's

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her name? Carmelita Hope?" The producer's posture shifted from casual to formal. Standing at attention, he said, "Yes, send her up."

Fender was standing, too. He set his empty glass on the dresser.

"Do you mind?" Ramsforth said. "This is an important visitor. She's been out of town and I've been waiting for some time."

"Thanks for the drink."

"Not at all. I hope I've reassured you about Miss Barnes."

Fender was back in the hotel corridor, approaching the head of the stairs, when the visiting lady appeared on the landing below. There was something familiar about her, although she was far more exotic than any woman he had ever seen in Baytown. She was wearing a red silk-jersey dress that clung to every curve of her body. It, and the matching red high-heeled shoes, contrasted with sheer charcoal nylons. Golden hair, worn loose, crowned her head and partially veiled her face with ringlets.

His heart pounding, Fender slipped into an alcove and held his breath as the woman passed by. There was no question about it. This provocative woman, having announced herself as Carmelita Hope, was really none other than Sylvia Barnes!

Walking up the East Hill in gathering darkness, Fender could still smell the perfume she wore.

Morgan Fender sat in front of his television set with the sound turned off. He was staring at an empty bean tin on the table. There was a fork standing in it. A package of brown bread had three slices out of it.

What was going on? Sylvia had told him a story of how this man treated her badly. Then she went to his room in disguise!

A movie was starting that Fender wanted to see. He turned up the sound and watched the film until ten o'clock. Then, as instructed, he stayed tuned for the local and national news.

The lead story was sensational. A man had been found murdered in his room at the Coronet Hotel. Police were sent there following an anonymous call from a woman who did not identify herself. The victim, a Toronto resident named Ramsforth, was lying on the floor, half undressed. He had been stabbed in the throat. The weapon, a nine-inch kitchen knife, was beside him.

Fender got up and turned off the set. He was breathing hard. Here was trouble close to home. He could call the police now, or he could check out Sylvia first. There might be some explanation.

He left his apartment and walked down the corridor to her door.

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He knocked. She answered as if she'd been waiting on the other side.

"Who's there?"

"It's me, Morgan."

"You can't come in."

"Please, Sylvia."

"Say the password."

"We don't have any password."

"It's 'heartache.' "

"All right then. Heartache."

A chain rattled, the door opened. He went inside. Sylvia was naked. She said, "My clothes have rebelled against me. They believe I am not clean."

"You can't stay like this." He hurried back to his apartment and took the spare tracksuit from his closet. He brought it to her apartment, where the door was closed again. He knocked.

"Who's there?"

"Me again. Heartache."

"The password has been changed."

"What is it now?"

"Death of innocence."

"Okay. Death of innocence."

She opened the door and he went inside.

"Put this on. We're about the same height. Go ahead, it believes you're perfectly clean."

When she'd dressed, she said, "Are you going to call the police?"

"I'm not sure." It was not a simple situation. He had been alone with the victim not long before the murder. The desk clerk would remember him. Was he an accomplice? Had he, the male visitor, committed the murder and fled, leaving the body to be discovered by the female visitor?

"I hope you don't call them," Sylvia said. "The young man only wanted to help. Carmelita told me."

"Tell the truth, Sylvia. Carmelita killed that man."

"No, no. Carmelita was the victim. He was trying to do terrible things to her."

Fender decided to say something. He had read about multiple personalities. The disorder was more common, apparently, than had been understood. "May I speak to Carmelita?"

"She's gone. You won't see Carmelita again."

Fender slept on the couch in Sylvia's living room. No school tomor-

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row, it was Saturday. The morning news provided a surprise. Police had arrested the Coronet Hotel desk clerk for the killing of Stanley Ramsforth. Conducting a routine patrol of the upstairs corridors, the youth had heard sounds of a struggle in Room 217. He knocked; the room went silent. Suspicions aroused, he used his passkey and opened the door. He discovered Ramsforth on the bed, holding down a young woman, a hand blocking her mouth. He pulled the man off; they struggled. Ramsforth forced the clerk towards the open window. He was going to push him through.

The clerk managed to gasp, "Help me!"

It was then that the woman reached inside her handbag, took out the knife, and placed it in the clerk's hand. The youth stabbed once, driving the blade into Ramsforth's throat. Ramsforth fell to the floor.

By the time the clerk knelt to inspect the dying man, the girl had vanished. In a panic, the youth left the room and locked the door. Only hours later, when he had let the police in and had described the victim's two visitors, and after he had gone home at the end of his shift, did he decide to come forward with the truth.

In the months that followed, the clerk's role in the killing was judged to be self-defence. He was a law-abiding citizen with no police record. Ramsforth, on the other hand, was discovered to be a man with a nasty reputation for using women. The young Baytowner was sentenced to a year's probation.

The police doubted they would ever learn the identity of the mystery woman. She was probably a desperate person who had followed the producer from Toronto. One of his former conquests who did not know when to cut her losses.

As for Sylvia Barnes and Morgan Fender, they worked out that year at Pine Street School. Then, in June, they resigned and left town. There was a rumor that they moved to Winnipeg, got married, and found teaching jobs.

The Winnipeg winters were harsh. But it was an interesting city, with many new places for the young couple to explore. Fender enjoyed living with Sylvia. She was cheerful and even-tempered, an ideal companion.

And yet, however much fun they were having, however tranquil their existence continued to be, he was left with something to consider. Would Carmelita Hope come back some day? And if she did, would he find her more attractive than Sylvia? ●

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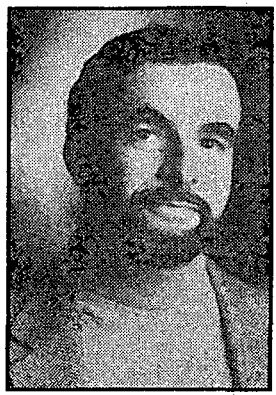
1997 Readers Award

Jeffery Deaver



Doug Allyn

George C. Chesbro

Dubbed "the O. Henry of the crime story" by his agent, Deborah Schneider, Jeffery Deaver topped our readers' list of favorites this year for the second time since 1995. Like O. Henry, Mr. Deaver knows how to put a twist in the tail of his short stories, delivering a walloping surprise after laying down a tantalizing trail of misdirection. In 1995 the Virginia author shared the number-one spot with Michigan's Doug Allyn. This year he takes a solo first with a courtroom mystery cleverly entitled "Double Jeopardy" (Sept/Oct 1997).

As masterful as Mr. Deaver is with the mystery short story, he has acquired an even greater reputation as a novelist. His 1996 novel *The Bone Collector* has been bought by Universal Pictures under producer Martin Bregman and director Philip Noyce. Next month Simon & Schuster will release a brand new Deaver novel, *The Coffin Dancer,* and *EQMM* will publish another of the author's diabolically deceptive short stories, "The Fall Guy."

A strong second in this year's voting, four-time Readers Award winner Doug Allyn stole readers' hearts with a tale of a very differ-

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ent sort from Jeffery Deaver's "Double Jeopardy." Atmospheric and suspenseful, reflective and subtle, "Copperhead Run" (June 1997) is Doug Allyn at his best, depicting characters one doesn't forget in a situation that made this reader's hair stand on end. Since his last Readers Award win in 1996, Mr. Allyn has seen the publication of his third full-length mystery, *A Dance in Deep Water* (St. Martin's Press), a book that had its genesis, like his previous novels, in a short story he wrote for *EQMM.*

Third place this year goes to a newcomer to the *EQMM* winner's circle, a writer who has long been celebrated in the mystery world as original in both the style and subject matter of his fiction. George C. Chesbro's winning story "The Problem with the Pigs" is as engagingly offbeat as its author's fine reputation would lead us to expect. The only one of the three leading stories to feature a series character, it is an offshoot of the popular series of novels Mr. Chesbro writes featuring a dwarf detective called Mongo. In "The Problem with the Pigs" (June 1997), Mongo's brother Garth takes the starring role, but Mongo is back in the limelight in the author's latest novel, *Dream of a Falling Eagle* (Simon & Schuster).

Photo credits: Deaver by Jerry Bauer; Allyn by Peter Papadopolous; Chesbro by Ken Fogelman

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . . "Unmarked Graves" *by George C. Chesbro*
"Models" *by Kristine Kathryn Rusch*
Fifth . . . . "Meyer and Me" *by Gerald Tomlinson*
Sixth . . . "The Beaches of Paraguay" *by Doug Allyn*
"The Old Spies Club" *by Edward D. Hoch*
"Since My Last Confession" *by Nick Schinker*
"At the Tent of Holofernes" *by Peter Tremayne*
Seventh . "Petrakov's Framed Gorilla" *by Ben Klein*
"Games of Chance" *by Clark Howard*
Eighth . . "Never a Cross Word" *by Peter Lovesey*
Ninth . . . "Out of Control" *by Clark Howard*
Tenth . . . "The Escape" *by Kandis Elliot*

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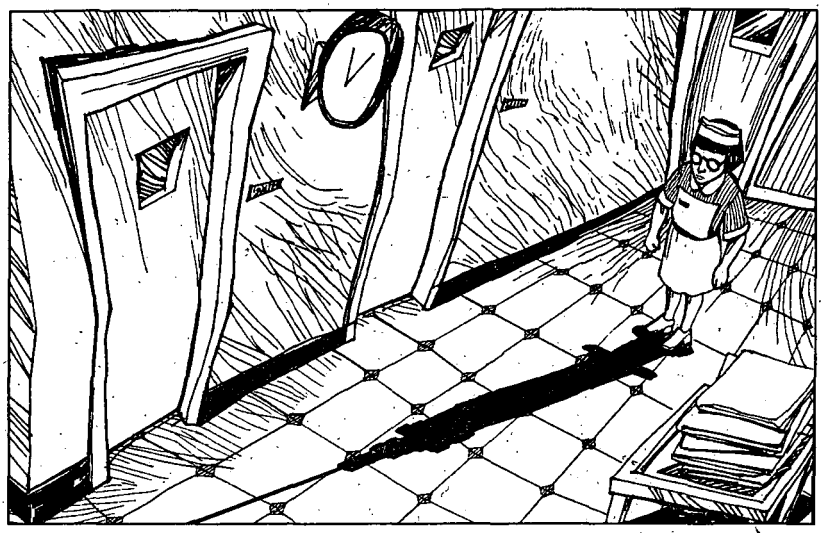

Art by Allen Davis

WEE BETTY POPE

by Peter Turnbull

Tuesday, 14:30–22:30 hours

The thought occurred to her again. It had occurred twice already that day, once in the morning, again at lunchtime, and now, in the early afternoon, it had occurred for a third time. She knew now that it would remain inside her head, at the very forefront of her mind for the next hour, probably longer, because each time the thought occurred it remained in her mind longer than it had the last time it occurred. The thought was now moving beyond a recurring thought, it was a notion that was taking root, becoming an obsession. No, no, it was more than that. It was becoming a belief: a conviction. She had tried to resist. She did not want to believe it, but eventually it overwhelmed her and now she was coming to accept it and, in doing so, finally knew at the age of fifty-three what Christians meant by belief. She didn't believe in what they

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believed, all those good church people, but she knew that the mechanism was the same, something so strong, so much a part of her that to remove it would leave a void of incalculable vastness; yet there was not a shred of evidence to support the belief. Even the Christians had relics and miracles and documented appearances of the Virgin at diverse places which became shrines. She had nothing, yet the belief was strong and full and complete. So complete that now she would not be dissuaded. It had grown quietly. At first it was no more than a fleeting wonder which had flashed across her mind when she was returning home on a wet, dark afternoon, sitting downstairs on a bus, she recalled, perhaps ten years ago now. Then she had thought no further of it, because it was too ridiculous, until some months later, also winter, she recalled. So it was after a time gap of perhaps twelve months that she thought the same thought again. On that occasion she was looking at her reflection in the mirror in the hallway of her flat, adjusting her hat before going out. On the second occasion the thought was the same, but stronger somehow, and it remained with her for a minute or two longer. After a five-year period the thought had become a weekly occurrence. Now, ten years after it had first occurred to her as she sat downstairs on a bus one dark, wet afternoon, the sort of dark wet afternoon that can only occur in Glasgow, where it's dark at three P.M. and won't get light again until ten A.M. and won't stop raining at all, the thought was fixed, a conviction, a belief, more in her mind than out. She walked into the living room of her flat. Her husband sat on the settee, his eyes were glued to the television, horse racing from an English shire county. Where it was from didn't matter. What did matter was the money he was gambling.

"You going out?" Over the years he had had some big wins and because of that he thought he could read form, but over the years

When Peter Turnbull's first novel, *Deep and Crisp and Even,* was published in 1981, it helped to change the face of crime fiction set in Scotland. The book showed the "mean streets" of Glasgow, rather than the cozy drawing rooms more often depicted by other writers. The series to which this story belongs is hardboiled, like most of the author's other work. ¶

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he had lost more than he had won. The threadbare carpet said so, as did her need to purchase clothes from the Oxfam shop and not having a holiday for many, many years. And the little things said so, her use of second-class stamps being one she felt keenly, especially when her sister wrote using first-class stamps occasionally, quite unnecessarily putting two stamps on the envelope—making the statement that she, her sister, had married well.

"Aye." Rachel Ruthven considered herself in the mirror. "That's why I've got my hat on."

Her husband groaned in response to her cynicism and then groaned more loudly as a horse fell at a fence. "To hell," he snarled. "When will you be back?"

"Don't know." She turned on her heels and left the room and walked into the hallway, towards the front door.

"Hey!" he shouted after her. "Where are you going, hen?"

"The police station," she called from the open door.

"What? Why?"

But Rachel Ruthven was already closing the door behind her and was stepping down the common stair.

She stepped out of the mouth of the close into Park Street. It was a pleasantly warm summer afternoon, quite a different time of year to that at which the thought had first occurred to her. So pleasant, in fact, did she find the weather that she decided to walk to Charing Cross. She knew there was a police station there, just opposite Charing Cross Mansions. Not only would she enjoy the walk, but it would give her time to mull over her story. She turned into Woodlands Road and enjoyed the lush foliage of the trees on the bank beyond Queen's College. Glasgow was her native city and like most Glaswegians, she wouldn't, and doubted that she could, live anywhere else, because to be a Glaswegian in Glasgow is to pursue a way of life, to adopt a separate culture, and to do so with enthusiasm. She continued to walk to Charing Cross, stopping once only to direct an Oriental-looking young man to the youth hostel on Park Terrace. She turned into Charing Cross and entered the public entrance of the police station, which had always been a landmark in the city for as long as she could remember but which she had never had occasion to enter. Until now. She went up to the uniform bar where a young, and handsome in her eyes, constable smiled at her and said, "Good afternoon, madam."

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"I'd like to report a murder." She spoke calmly, matter-of-factly, surprising herself that she did so.

"I see, madam." Phil Hamilton displayed neither emotion nor surprise, which puzzled her. But then perhaps he heard such things daily.

"Well, more than one."

"I see, madam."

"Five or six or seven."

"Five, six, or seven?"

"Maybe more. But there's no need to rush. If I'm right."

"No need to rush?"

"No. They've been dead these ten years past."

"Ten years?"

"Aye, about that, but I may not be right."

"Can I ask your name and address, please?"

"Rachel Ruthven, 197 Park Road. Top left."

Hamilton wrote on the pad, then said, "Right, Mrs. Ruthven, if you'd like to take a seat. I'll ask someone to come and speak to you."

"Me," Montgomerie smiled down the phone, "I'll be home when I'm home. Impatient, aren't you; the shift has just started. It's only two-fifteen now. I shall be working until ten if not beyond; we finish the shift when we finish the shift. At ten or any time after ten."

"Well, I'll be here, right here, under the duvet. I'm not moving all afternoon and evening."

"Utter waste of time, if you ask me."

"My time to waste, and your bed is so comfortable."

"As you wish. Have to go now."

"I'll be waiting."

He replaced the phone. That's always the way of it, he found, the flush of excitement in a new relationship, the feeling of "this is the one." He stirred his coffee and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He glanced to his left out of the window and saw again how the sandstone of Charing Cross Mansions glowed in the sun. It was a sight which reached him more deeply of late, deeper than it had done the previous summer when he took the natural beauty of it for granted. He was twenty-seven years old and he wondered if he was developing a soul. His phone rang. He leaned forward and picked it up. "DC Montgomerie."

"Afternoon, Malcolm. Phil Hamilton of the uniform bar here."

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"Hi, Phil."

"Malcolm, we have a lady member of the public . . ."

"Just one?"

"Who would like to report a forty-one."

"Oh . . . I knew it was too quiet."

"If not six or seven forty-ones."

"Phil, I'm not in the mood for jokes."

"Neither, I dare say, are the six or seven good folk who are in the clay or up the lum before their time if this lady speaks not with a forked tongue and if her word is a good word. Come and speak to her, there's a good CID officer."

Montgomerie found Rachel Ruthven to be a small woman, slightly built, prim, neat, precise, clean; and it did not surprise him when she told him her occupation was that of a nurse. Rachel Ruthven, for her part, gazed adoringly at Malcolm Montgomerie and envied the inevitable young woman or women in his life and found herself wondering if all the handsome young men in Glasgow were to be found within the police station at Charing Cross.

"I don't know if I'm wasting your time, young man. I'm sorry if I am. I have no evidence."

"That's all right, madam, let's just take it one step at a time and see how far we get. Anyway, it's our job to provide the evidence."

"It may be just an old woman's neurosis."

"Well, you strike me as being neither elderly nor neurotic." Montgomerie paused. "Supposing you just start talking in your own words, tell me what's on your mind. Then we'll turn it into a statement if necessary."

Rachel Ruthven smiled and relaxed. She found it easy to relax in the company of this man of chiselled features and downturned moustache. Clearly a man who liked women and liked women to like him. She had seen similar things before, young doctors coming onto the wards knowing that they are going to make the hearts of the student nurses flutter, and invariably doing so. "Well, to let you understand, it's going back a good few years, ten years now. Is that too late?" Montgomerie shook his head. "We tend to lose interest if the crime in question happened more than seventy years ago because then there is little possibility of the perpetrator still being alive. Ten years isn't so long. I have known people's past reach out and tap them on the shoulder after a much longer period than ten years."

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"Well, all right. It was when I was at Garscube Road Hospital, as a nurse. . . ."

"Uh-huh."

"I was on the geriatric ward for about three years. To let you understand, the thing was that geriatrics were not on the ward to die, it wasn't a hospice. They were there to recover, to be discharged home, or to a nursing home. They were there to have cataracts removed or hips replaced, but because they were frail they needed a specialised form of nursing care. They were, still are, very fragile."

"I see."

"But occasionally they did die on the ward. Not being strong enough to cope with anaesthetic is not so uncommon."

"I can understand that."

"It's a gentle form of death and the grief and guilt that are associated with the death of a younger person or child is not present. Often there is a sort of relief among the relatives of the deceased. I don't mean to be spiteful, they are not being malicious, often they'll say, well, it's over for her now, she was in real pain, had no quality of life, she was bitten all over with arthritis, pills couldn't keep the pain down, not at that age. . . . You know yon attitude?"

"Aye. It's not unreasonable."

"No, it's not, but the thing is that geriatric people don't often die in the ward. If they do pass away, it's during or immediately after the operation. By far the greater number of geriatric patients are admitted, operated on, and discharged. They breathe their last in a nursing home or a hospice, not in hospital."

"Go on."

"But one year we had six, six at least, maybe more, who died in their sleep, apparently of heart failure, within a period of about eight or nine months."

"And your suspicions were aroused?"

"Only now. I'm sorry it's been so long, and other ward staff didn't appear suspicious, so maybe I'm wrong."

"Just carry on, please."

"You see, at the time it was believed that death was from natural causes; the elderly people concerned just didn't wake up. They went peacefully in their sleep and the relatives tended to be more relieved than distressed—you know, a peaceful, painless death at a respectable age is a blessing, even if it is sudden, and nobody seemed to see it any other way."

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"No suggestion of foul play?"

"No. We never thought of the possibility."

"But something's made you suspicious?"

"Aye, and I'll tell you what. See, my wee mind, I'm a bit slow at putting two and two together. One year later, when there'd been no further sudden deaths of patients, I was still working on the ward and in the medicine cabinet I came across a bottle of codantrium."

"Codantrium?"

"It's a muscle relaxant and is administered in a jag, as an injection. It's dangerous if used wrongly."

"Is it?"

"So a doctor told me when I showed it to him. It has no place on a geriatric ward. I only recognised it because I'd worked with multiple sclerosis patients. There's a form of MS in which the muscles don't waste so much as tense up and the patients have a jerky, robotlike movement and codantrium is administered to counteract that. It's used in other areas as well, other conditions, but not on a geriatric ward in which people come to have hips replaced and cataracts removed. The doctor and I just assumed that the ward had once had a patient who needed it for some reason and it had remained in the cabinet long after the patient had been discharged."

"Now you think differently?"

"Yes, you see, if it's administered in a high enough concentration, one good syringe full will do. When it isn't needed it will relax all the muscles of the patients. They can't move their body, can't wiggle their toes, can't cry out; they slowly stop breathing, the heart slowly stops, but they remain mentally alert. They know what's happening but can't do anything about it."

Montgomerie looked intently at Rachel Ruthven. He was beginning to be intrigued by her story. He let her continue at her own pace.

"So I thought, interesting, how horrible, and that was it. We put the drug into the sin bin and got on with our jobs. But see, my wee brain, it's slow, so it is. My wee brain is going backwards. It was a year after that, I was on a bus, I realised that I'd seen the codantrium in the medicine cabinet at the same time we had that spate of deaths on the ward."

"Those deaths which you thought were because of natural causes?"

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"Aye, all six or seven, or eight, all were put down as 'heart failure.'"

"I'm beginning to see what you're driving at."

"If those folk had been injected with codantrium, at night, they would appear to have died in their sleep and we wouldn't have been suspicious, especially as the death was invariably the cause of relief rather than grief among relatives. You're talking of patients in their eighties and nineties, some of whom had got really crotchety and difficult to live with. But after I had that first flash of doubt, I didn't think about it again, not for a few months. Then I thought it again and the thought recurred more often, and now it's never out of my mind and I don't want to take this knowledge to my grave. I want to share it."

"I think I'll go and get some forms." Montgomerie stood. "I think we had better turn this into a statement. When I return I'll be asking you the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question."

"Aye." Rachel Ruthven smiled. "I thought you might and aye, I know who did it. That only came clear after a few years too."

"I'll go and get some forms."

When Montgomerie returned, and after having written the preliminaries, he said, "So, having told me what happened . . ."

"What I think happened."

"You're right, what you think happened, so would you like to tell me who you think did it?"

"Pope was her name," said Mrs. Ruthven. "Wee Betty Pope, she was called. That was her name because she was, oh, so big." Mrs. Ruthven held her hand palm upwards, at her shoulder height as she sat. "Much less than five feet tall, say about four foot six. She had to wear girls or adolescent clothes. I remember her well, sort of young, very still-faced, but she had a gleam in her eyes. She seemed efficient but you could see that she hurt inside when other nurses were on about their boyfriends. You could see it clearly."

"I see." Montgomerie tapped his pen on the paper. "This is quite a problem, Mrs. Ruthven."

"Isn't it. But only if I'm right. I might be completely mistaken."

"You might, you might indeed, but equally you might not. And we won't know that until we have looked closely at it."

"Aye, but there's no hurry, all the old folk, they're well dead."

"I don't know about that, Mrs. Ruthven. How old was Miss Pope at the time you knew her?"

"Early twenties."

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"So now she's in her thirties. She may still be a nurse somewhere."

"Oh dear God. I hadn't thought of that."

"That's the way I look at it, Mrs. Ruthven. I want to know what she's doing now, what she did then, and what she did during the in-between."

"That never occurred to me. . . ." Mrs. Ruthven's face drained of colour.

"So tell me, what made you suspect Miss Pope?"

"Och, no one thing." Mrs. Ruthven recovered some colour. "And only then after memories and impressions had mulched down over the years. In the first place, the deaths occurred whenever she was on the ward, it seemed to coincide with a shift of hers. At least, I think she was always there, usually a night shift. Then she left the ward and there were no more unexpected deaths of elderly people; they were discharged fit and the morale of the ward staff increased again. It's in hindsight that I realised that the cause of death and the lowering of morale were down to wee Betty Pope."

"But nothing specific?"

Mrs. Ruthven shook her head. "If there was, I'd have been sitting here long before now."

"Aye, I can well imagine. So we have to find Miss Pope now. I suppose you have no idea . . . ?"

"None." Mrs. Ruthven anticipated the question.

"How would we access the ward notes? Would they be kept after this length of time?"

"I can't be certain, but most probably."

Montgomerie stroked his moustache. "You see, Mrs. Ruthven, finding Miss Pope probably won't be difficult. If she's still a nurse, still employed by the Greater Glasgow Health Authority, then we can locate her with one phone call. No problem. What may be difficult after all this time is proving how the elderly people in question died. I don't suppose you can recall the names of any of the elderly people in question?"

"I do, in fact. The first of them to die. I'll never forget him, I have mixed feelings about him but I'll never forget him."

"Nurses are not supposed to get emotionally involved with their patients." Montgomerie smiled.

"This one was different. He was a slender, silver-haired man in his seventies. He was called Walter Sherwood. A widower."

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"I'm impressed by your memory."

"No need. Walter Sherwood was my father."

"Oh . . ." Montgomerie paused and then said, "I'm sorry. . . ."

"He was in for a hip replacement operation. His heart was fine. There's no history of heart disease in my father's family. He had recovered from the operation, he was ready to be discharged, he was looking forward to getting home, back to his wee flat in Partick, and they phoned me at home to tell me he'd died in the night." She paused. "Anyway, I rushed to the hospital and on to the ward just in time to see little Miss Pope guiding the concealment trolley out of the ward while another nurse pushed it. She avoided my gaze, but I only realised that later, when I began to realise other things; all the things came together one day, one winter, when I was sitting on a bus. See, that was Betty Pope's first week on the ward. My father's death was given as heart failure. Then, over the next few months, there were six or seven other deaths from heart failure. Then Betty Pope left the ward and there were no more unexpected deaths; the old folk had their hips replaced and their cataracts removed and went home."

Montgomerie leaned back in his chair. "Another point occurs to me, Mrs. Ruthven, which is that if we are going to prove that you are correct, we are going to have to exhume your father's body and the bodies of the other six or seven elderly people you mention."

"Ah . . ."

"You'd object to that?"

"No. It's just that my father was cremated." She smiled. "The others, I don't know."

"But still, what you have said is serious enough for us to want to take a wee look at it. Can you tell me when your father died?" Mrs. Ruthven gave a date some ten years earlier.

"And that," Montgomerie wrote on his pad, "was the first murder, if it was murder. Then there were another half a dozen deaths by heart failure on the ward until the time Betty Pope left and took up another post?"

"That's about the size of it, but I can offer no proof."

"And you say the hospital may still have the ward notes?"

"Yes. Come to think of it, it is likely that they would have them still. Ten years isn't a long time to keep records. When I was a student nurse, myself and another girl were asked to clear shelf space. We had to carry piles of notes to the hospital incinerator. We spent hours sitting in the dusty room in the loft of the hospital

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going through the notes, some of them were sixty years old and even then they were only being thrown out because the hospital needed the shelf space. So, ten years is nothing. I'm sure the records will still be accessible."

Donoghue listened patiently and he didn't interrupt once as Montgomerie fed back to him the account of his interview with Mrs. Ruthven. When Montgomerie had finished he leaned forward in his already smoke-filled room and plucked his pipe from where it lay in the huge ashtray he kept on his desk. He lit the already carbonated contents with his gold-plated lighter and said, "Could be a big one, Montgomerie, could be the biggest one we have had in all time."

"I would think so, sir. This was ten years ago. If there is some truth in it, what has she been doing since?"

"Or before? I think we'd better start finding out, I think . . . What did you say this drug was called?"

Montgomerie consulted his notes. "Codantrium. That's with a 'C'."

"Right." Donoghue scribbled on his pad. "I'll phone Dr. Reynolds, pick his brains. I am no man of science but . . . What do you think? Would a drug, any drug, be traceable on a corpse after that length of time?"

"I really have no idea either, sir."

"An easy matter to find out. Who's on the back shift with you?"

"Ray Sussock."

"Right. Open a file on Betty Pope. Then find her, wherever she is, bring her in for a quiz session, and advise her management, who may want to suspend her from her duties."

"That's a lot of mud to sling without any evidence, sir."

"Isn't it, but are you prepared to take the risk of withholding this information from her management and allowing her access to patients to continue? If you are, you're prepared to stick your neck out further than I would be. No, I think that we seize control of this situation, Montgomerie. I'd rather overreact than underreact. If there's full and meaningful apologies to be made at the end of all this, then full and meaningful apologies will be made, but right now we seize control of the situation, as I said."

"Very good, sir."

"Then if you'll be good enough to apprise Sergeant Sussock of this; in fact, do that first of all. Invite him to give this priority and

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then invite him from me to begin a trawl of hospital records, wherever Miss Pope has worked. Could take some time but the sooner it's started, the sooner it's done. We might also want to have a wee check inside her home. Could be gold dust there, if there is any truth in Mrs. Ruthven's complaint."

"You realise that this is one of the few occasions, one of the very rare occasions that you haven't phoned me at home in the wee small hours?"

Donoghue cradled the phone against his left ear, holding it with his right hand curled round the back of his head. "A pleasant change for you, sir."

"Indeed. How can I help you?" Reynolds smiled down the phone.

"It's in connection with a drug called codantrium, spelled just as it sounds with a 'C'."

"Codantrium? It's not a drug I'm familiar with. What is it, do you know?"

"It's reported to us as being a muscle relaxant."

"Codantrium, you say. I can look it up in Mimms."

"The question is, would the drug be identifiable in a ten-year-old corpse?"

"It's possible. It depends on the quality of the drug. Heavier poisons will remain in a corpse. A corpse, even an old and decayed corpse, is something of a time capsule. Many drugs need living tissue in order to dissipate, dead tissue will often trap what's inside it. Arsenic is still traceable in the locks of Napoleon's hair, for example."

"Really? So he was poisoned by the English?"

"Yes, he was. But not intentionally. The Victorians used an arsenic-based chemical to produce green paint and for green icing for cakes as well. Napoleon's room in the house on St. Helena was painted green and the humid sea air released the arsenic from the paint in the form of arsenogenic vapour. He was convinced the English were poisoning him. He had stomach cramps, headaches, bowel problems, and was convinced that the English were poisoning his food. In fact, it was coming from the walls of his bedroom. Which also explains why he always felt better out of doors. But the point is, some chemicals will remain in a corpse. Some won't. I don't know codantrium, but I'll look it up and come back to you."

Montgomerie drove to Garscube Road Hospital. He went to Ward 9.

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He spoke to Sister Higo. He mentioned Nurse Pope and wondered if she knew her. Sister Higo groaned.

"You know who I'm speaking of?"

"Wee Betty? Aye, I know who you're speaking of. Anybody that's met with her remembers her, and not for what you might call positive reasons."

"Oh?"

"Take a seat, I'll tell you."

Montgomerie sat on a tubular framed chair in the sister's office. A neat office, an everything-in-its-place office. Totally sterile.

"I never worked with Betty, but we were nursing students together, same nurses' hostel, eleven, twelve years ago. See Betty, see her, she was just plain bloody awkward. She took everything personal, like when she failed her exams—she pretty well failed all her exams and got through the course after a series of re-sits—she reckoned it was because the examiner took a personal dislike to her and she appealed on that basis. She made no secret of it. 'He failed me because he didn't like me' was what she said. Anyway, she didn't get her way because we had an examination number to guarantee anonymity and Betty had to re-sit every paper she took."

"I see. A difficult customer, you'd say?"

"Very. I couldn't help feeling sorry for her, in the early days at least. Her size, you see, like a wee girl, and appearance is more important to a woman than to a man."

"You think so?"

"Aye, I do, don't you?" Sister Higo impressed Montgomerie as being a woman of a sensible, down-to-earth manner. Quietly spoken, short black hair, reading glasses hung round her neck on a cord of blue nylon. "I mean, if you'd take a walk round Menzies or W. H. Smiths or any newsagent and look at the 'women's magazines,' so called, they're all about fashion, and beauty, and appearance. The 'men's magazines' are about pursuits. So poor wee Betty Pope read all the fashion magazines and looked at the pictures of clothes worn by models with endless legs and then had to go into children's sections of shops to buy her mufti. She wore practical things, pretty things, but fashionable? Not possible for wee Betty. Well, she was really out of it when she was a student, when the other student nurses turned to their favourite, all-consuming interest. . . .

"Men?"

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"Aye, as they invariably did. Poor old Betty just sat quietly, very out of it." She paused. "Aye, and there was something else about Betty. She came from Edinburgh, plenty of opportunities to train in that town, just as many as in Glasgow, but she'd clearly left home. She gave the impression of leaving something behind her, never said what, as opposed to going on somewhere. But what it was, she never said, she never spoke about her life before nursing training."

"I see." Montgomerie enjoyed watching Sister Higo's eyes dilate as she cast them over his features, his square jaw, his down-turned moustache, his thick mane of black hair. "You said that you felt sorry for her in the beginning. I take it something happened to stop you extending your sympathy?"

Sister Higo nodded. "No one thing, just the accumulation. It was difficult living with her. We were in the same nurses' quarters, like tenements: a common kitchen, toilet, shower, and wee sitting room, then five separate bedrooms. There was always something happening, something to cause a fuss. The fire alarm being set off at regular intervals was the mild end, but would you believe a dead bird in the fridge, or excrement under the cooker grill? All the fuss that would cause, all the revulsion. Nobody put her hand up to it but Betty always seemed to be there, lapping up the excitement, really feasting off it, feeding on the distress and every other emotion you can imagine. After a while, I just knew that it was all down to Betty, that all those weird, strange things were her doing. I've wondered over the years if she wasn't trying to get some emotion into her life. Any emotion's better than none. Maybe getting some acceptance as well."

"Acceptance?"

"Aye, see her, she never put her hand up to anything but she was always around when something happened or was discovered. So if we were all standing there saying, Who could do this? Who'd want to do this to us? she was also there, part of the gang, she was on the crew, shoulder to shoulder."

"You may well have a point there, but I'm no psychologist either."

"There were other things as well. The post was delivered to the residency office, then put in a box, one box for each flat, and each day one of us would go and see what mail there was, if any, for our flat. Each time Betty went, there was no mail. I never remember her bringing any post back for us."

"Could be coincidence."

"Wait, hear me out. Then what would happen is that we would

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get a lot of mail all at once but much of it had been double franked, with days, sometimes a couple of weeks between the frankings. And again, and this is only hindsight, I feel that Betty was keeping any mail she picked up, keeping it in her room for a period of time, then popping it back in a letter box. That's another thing, all the second frankings were local, so that every once in a while we'd get this backlog of mail, just for our flat, all double stamped, and Betty's mail, usually from her parents, would be part of it. So again, she'd be sitting round, part of the group, part of the puzzlement and the annoyance and all the rest of it, and at the time, well, I can't say nobody suspected her but by then I was having my wee doubts about wee Betty."

"Now?"

"Now I'm certain the evil wee minx was at the bottom of everything, getting off on the fuss she created, thinking that no one would suspect her because she made herself out to be a victim like all the rest."

"I'm beginning to form a picture of the nature of Miss Pope. Do you know where she's working at present?"

"If at all. She's the sort that would have difficulty holding down a job, but the hospital management will tell you, that's if she's still in the Greater Glasgow Health Authority. Do I take it that she is in some form of trouble?"

"Well, yes." Montgomerie forced a smile. "Between you and me and the gatepost, within these four walls, and in recognition of your cooperation, we think that she may have murdered someone."

"Oh my God."

"But that is between you and me."

"Of course."

Montgomerie stood. "And we shall proceed with caution. Could you point me in the direction of the hospital records?"

"Hospital Management. Top floor of the new block. That says everything. A new block is built and who gets the top floor?"

"Hospital administration."

"Top two floors. Medical staff were accommodated below them. When I started at the hospital, administration had the worst accommodation, now they have the best; they hold the purse strings since our illustrious NHS is now about cost-effectiveness, not patient care as in the good old days . . . well . . . and I still have such a long way to go before I can pick up my pension, I'll have to learn to live with the beast, but it's not the NHS I joined."

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On the top floor of the "new block" Montgomerie knocked and then entered the room of the hospital administration. "Yes?" A surly young man spoke without looking up. "Can I help you?"

"Police." Montgomerie flashed his ID. "I'd like to talk to the hospital administrator." The youth picked up the phone on his desk and stabbed two numbers. "Mr. McPhail? Aye, there's a . . . a policeman to see you . . . sir. All right . . . sir." He hung up and said, "You can go in now. That door." Montgomerie strode past his desk and opened the door beyond.

"Mr. McPhail?"

"Indeed I am. How can I help you? Please take a pew."

Montgomerie sat and told McPhail the story.

McPhail paused and said, "Right, well, I'll do what I can to be of assistance."

"Thank you. I would think the most important thing to do is to locate her."

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem. Even if she's no longer employed in this Health Authority, we should still be able to trace her." McPhail reached forward and picked up his phone. He pressed two numbers, waited a long time, and said, "Rupert . . . get onto Personnel, please, find out the present workplace of a nurse called Pope, Betty Pope."

Montgomerie held up his hand and caught McPhail's eye.

"Wait . . ." said McPhail.

"We'd also like to know where she's been working since she was on Ward Nine at this hospital."

McPhail nodded. "We'd also like her service record to date." He replaced the phone as if it had been put down on him. "Staff," he sighed.

"Yes, I met Rupert," said Montgomerie drily.

"Plenty of good, enthusiastic people out there and we have the likes of him." McPhail nodded towards the outer office. "He got his permanent post, then flew his true colours. He seems to delight in annoying people but does his job. Just. So we can't chop him. A good junior assistant would make all the difference to me in my job."

"I can imagine. I'd also like to see the ward records and patient records during the time Miss Pope spent at the hospital."

"She's in some form of trouble?" McPhail picked up his phone, then put it down again. "I'll wait for Rupert to come back."

"You could say that." Montgomerie raised his eyebrows. "I dare

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say you'll find out soon enough, but I'd rather not say too much at the present. How long will it take to trace her?"

"Seconds, if she's still in the Health Authority."

"If she's not?"

"We can tell you where she went to. Then it'll be up to you to pick up her trail. The DSS could help you, too. We'll let you have her National Insurance number, they can trace her with that. They're red-hot on data protection but if you make a strong enough case. . . ." The phone on his desk rang. He snatched it up. "McPhail . . . right. Thanks." He replaced the phone. "She's at Priesthill Hospital."

"Priesthill? That's another geriatric hospital, isn't it?"

"It's a hospice, strictly speaking. Terminal care. Many patients are elderly, but sadly not all."

"Of course." Montgomerie thought of a friend from university days, cruelly taken by cancer when in his twenties. "May I use your phone?"

"By all means." McPhail turned the phone round to face Montgomerie.

Montgomerie phoned P Division police station. He asked to be put through to DS Sussock. He told Sussock that Betty Pope was believed to be working at Priesthill Hospice, G53. He replaced the handset. "If she's not there they'll be able to tell my colleagues where she lives. The archives, Mr. McPhail?"

The archives were, Montgomerie found, kept in the basement of the hospital, neatly arranged by year, then ward. The records of Ward 9 of ten years previous were not difficult to locate.

"Hardly even dusty." McPhail took down a soft-backed volume from the shelf. "Right, Ward Nine, ten years ago. . . ." He began to leaf through the pages. "Oh . . . what have we here?" McPhail showed Montgomerie.

"Well, well, well." Montgomerie ran his hands over the places where the pages had been torn from the record. "That's significant in itself. I don't suppose they've been duplicated?"

"I'm afraid not. These are the only records."

"If I were to tell you that we are investigating suspicious deaths?"

"Oh."

"Could you suggest where else we might look for information about what happened on Ward Nine ten years ago?"

"Yes, I can. All deaths in the hospital are recorded separately.

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We can tell what dates have been removed from the ward record, we can check the 'death book' for those dates, see which deaths occurred on Ward Nine. The death books are over here." McPhail walked to the further end of the row of shelves. He reached up and got hold of a black ledger. He turned and carried the ledger to a small table. "These were the last years that the records were kept in this manner, now they're all filed to disk and a lot harder to access. What were those dates?"

Montgomerie told him.

McPhail opened the ledger and then groaned, then continued to turn the pages silently as one by one the dates of the records removed from the ward record book coincided with the dates of the pages removed from the deaths record.

"So what is she like?" Montgomerie drained his mug and put his feet on the desk.

"Full of her rights." Sussock swilled the remnants of his coffee about his mug. "Indignant about being brought in for quizzing. Didn't realise she was so small."

"I did mention it."

"Yes, but even so it still came as a shock." Sussock, the older, jaded cop, glanced out of the window of the DC's office at the graceful curve of Charing Cross Mansions glowing in the afternoon sun.

"She's here of her own volition?"

"Yes. She's sitting alone in an interview room. Fabian wants to hold off quizzing her until he's spoken to us. Said he wanted to see us as soon as you had arrived. Thought you'd like a coffee first."

"Good of you, Sarge, a bit risky, but good of you." Montgomerie grinned. "In fact, I'd go so far as to say that what they say about you just isn't true. Let's go and see Fabian."

Fabian Donoghue filled his pipe with tobacco of his favourite mix, a Dutch base for taste with a twist of dark shag to give a greater depth of flavour and to slow the burning rate. It was a special mix and made up for him by a tobacconist on one corner of George Square. His room was filled with a purple fog, as he'd been sitting at his desk smoking his pipe since 8:30 A.M. He lit the pipe with a flick of his gold-plated lighter, all the while remaining silent, listening intently to Montgomerie, as Montgomerie fed back information about the case of Betty Pope, beginning with Mrs. Ruthven

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walking in off the street because she could no longer live with her concerns and ending with Detective Sergeant Ray Sussock asking wee Betty Pope to accompany him to the police station.

"A case of momentous implications." Donoghue spoke when Montgomerie had finished. "If your suspicions are confirmed, and Mrs. Ruthven's concerns are well founded, this woman has been quietly and ruthlessly sending people to early deaths for ten years and nobody picked it up because the victims were elderly and also, perhaps, terminally ill. Well, for my part, I've spoken with Dr. Reynolds, who didn't have first-hand knowledge of the drug in question," he consulted his notes, "codantrium, but clearly knew a man who did, as is said, and came back and told me that the drug doesn't show up in any of the normal screening tests that might but only might have been done in the case of sudden or unexpected death and so could easily have been missed. So it's a useful drug in that respect, from a murderer's point of view, but the user has to trust to luck if the drug is abused in this way because it's easy to find if it's looked for and it will remain in the corpse for a number of years. So I take it Miss Pope has not yet been arrested, or cautioned, or charged?"

"Not yet, sir." Sussock's chest hurt. He had been a heavy smoker in his youth, and now smoke went to his chest and seemed to stay there. He didn't relish sitting in Donoghue's office, particularly towards the end of Donoghue's working day, particularly when Donoghue had not been out all day. "Doesn't really or fully know what it's about."

"Right, that gives us a wee bit of scope but I want to play this by the book. I want to look inside her domicile."

"We'll need a warrant, sir."

"She won't give permission, you feel, Ray?"

"Not this little lady, sir."

"Very well, we have to kick off at some point; trouble is, arrest her for the murder of whom? Mrs. Ruthven's father was cremated, that's a nonstarter. We don't know the names of the others, if any, because someone has removed specific pages from the ward records and the 'death book,' so called. There's an awful lot of smoke but I can't see the flames. This is a bizarre complaint. A bizarre complaint needs a calm, rational response. So, Ray?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You and I will go and have a chat with Miss Pope. Depending

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on the outcome of the chat, we'll then go and look at her domicile, with or without a warrant."

"Very good, sir."

Donoghue had taken on board the reports of the extreme smallness of Betty Pope's stature, but he was nonetheless shaken to find a murder suspect sitting in an interview room with her feet dangling in the air and blinking at him from behind inexpensive spectacles. She was no larger than his own daughter, who was still in primary school.

"Good afternoon, Betty," he said as he and Sussock sat at the table.

Betty Pope's nose suddenly went up in the air as she turned and looked at the ceiling above and away from Donoghue and Sussock.

"Good evening, Miss Pope," Donoghue conceded, at which point Betty Pope looked at him. She was expressionless but at least she had looked at him. "I'm Detective Inspector Donoghue, you've met Mr. Sussock."

No reaction. She had a flat, round face, cheap jewellery, she wore her nurse's uniform.

"Miss Pope, do you know why you are here?"

No reaction.

Donoghue relaxed in his chair. This, he felt, was clearly going to be uphill all the way.

"I advised Miss Pope that she was required to assist our enquiries with a serious incident or incidents of some years ago." Ray Sussock leaned forward. "I also advised Miss Pope that she was attending of her own free will and she accepted that."

"So, I'm free to go then?" She spoke with a high-pitched voice and began to shuffle off her chair prior to dropping onto the floor. "I'm needed at my work, I was taken off the ward and we're short-staffed as it is."

"No, you can't go, not yet."

She scowled at Donoghue. A look of anger flashed across her eyes. It was a sudden insight into her soul. It chilled him.

"Miss Pope." Donoghue looked intently at her. "Does the name Ruthven mean anything to you?"

"Aye."

A silence.

"It does?"

"Aye." She wasn't giving anything away.

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"What does it mean to you?"

"Tayside, Grampian, and the Highlands."

"I'm sorry?"

"Tayside, Grampian, and the Highlands."

"Could you explain?"

"They're regions in Scotland."

"I'm aware of that."

"Well, see, them, they've each got a village called Ruthven. See, me, I know that because I once rented a room in Ruthven Street in Glasgow and I looked up a road atlas one day when I had time to spare to see if Ruthven was a place that they named the street after. It was, three places, maybe one of three places."

"I see."

"Nothing else?" prompted Sussock.

"No."

"Never met anyone called Ruthven?"

"No." A vigorous childlike shaking of the head.

"Not even a patient in a hospital?"

"I've been a nurse for twelve years, I can't remember all my patient's names."

"What about a colleague, a fellow nurse?"

"Oh . . ." She raised a pointed finger at Donoghue. "Aye, there was. What was she called? Rachel, aye, Rachel Ruthven at Garscube Road Hospital. Rachel Ruthven, aye."

"You remember her father?"

"I never met her father."

"You did, you know."

"I did?"

"Aye, he was one of your patients, you remember?"

Betty Pope looked worried. She remained silent. She looked to Donoghue like a fox who had heard the horn and the hounds, who knew that they had her scent, though they were still many miles off.

"You surely remember Rachel's father dying? Rachel Ruthven was called to the ward and arrived as you were guiding out the concealment trolley?"

"It's not the sort of incident anyone would forget," Sussock pressed.

"He was a gentleman by the name of Sherwood, like the forest, sort of name you'd remember. Walter Sherwood. He died about ten years ago."

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"I may remember."

"Well, you either do or you don't," Sussock snapped.

Betty Pope paled and shook her head, looking for all the world like a little girl who was trying to lie her way out of being caught eating gum in class. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember a distressed colleague coming to the ward when you were helping remove the body of her father? I confess that's not the sort of thing I'd forget."

"Oh, I remember that."

"Oh, you do?"

"I don't remember his name. I remember Rachel, I remember her father being on the ward, but I don't remember his name."

Donoghue put his pipe in his mouth.

"I don't like smoke," whined Betty Pope.

"I wasn't going to smoke it."

"I can still smell it. The burnt tobacco."

Donoghue slid the pipe back into his pocket. Sussock was pleased that he did for much the same reason that Betty Pope had objected.

"Tell me, Miss Pope." Donoghue withdrew his hand from his jacket pocket. "Are you familiar with the drug codantrium?"

A look of fear and alarm flashed across Betty Pope's eyes and Donoghue the hunter knew that he was closing down his quarry. He had a long way to go yet but the scent was strong. Sussock too had seen the look enter, then leave Betty Pope's eyes; he knew the significance of the look and Donoghue sensed him relaxing in his chair.

"No," she said flatly and softly, but it was clearly a lie and its delivery chimed like a single toll of a bell on a still night across a flat landscape.

Donoghue paused, allowing the silence following her denial to be heard and felt. "I see. It's a muscle relaxant."

"Oh."

"Codantrium was reported to have been noticed on Ward Nine of Garscube Road Hospital during your time there as a nurse. In that time, six or seven elderly patients died unexpectedly."

"Elderly patients don't die unexpectedly, you expect elderly people to die. It's their time."

"No you don't, not these days, not in the United Kingdom. There's nothing exceptional about reaching one hundred years old these days, not with the level of elderly care that's in operation. These days they make a fuss of the old lady or gentleman that

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reaches a hundred and twenty years. People who go to hospital for cataract operations or hip replacements and who don't go into postoperative shock walk out of hospital and go to the dancing. You don't expect them to die."

"We'd be able to furnish you with other names of elderly people who died when you were a nurse on their ward, all of whom may have looked forward to another ten or twenty or thirty years of peaceful existence on this island, but someone has torn the relevant pages from the ward records and the deaths register." Sussock raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Miss Pope?"

"No. . . . no."

"Not to worry, there's ways of finding out their names. We'll get them to you, see if we can jog a wee memory or two."

She slid off the chair. "I'm going home."

Donoghue put his hand on her shoulder. "Betty Pope, I'm arresting you for the murder of William Sherwood. You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and may be given in evidence."

"I didn't kill anyone." Said with a panic.

"Then you have nothing to fear, Miss Pope. We'd like to have a look inside your home."

"Well, you can't."

"We can. Since I've arrested you, we'll do it with your permission or we'll do it without your permission. If we do it with your permission, there'll be a lot less damage. But we'll do it, one way or the other."

"Damage?" She looked alarmed.

"We get a warrant and we kick the door down," explained Sussock. "Or you give us the keys and we let ourselves in."

"And then lock it behind us when we've finished," added Donoghue.

"It's your choice," said Sussock softly.

She glanced at Donoghue and then wrenched open a juvenile-looking handbag, removed a bunch of keys, and dropped them on the table.

Donoghue scooped them up. "You can make one phone call and then we'll need to take your fingerprints."

In his office Donoghue said to Sussock, "Leave her alone overnight, let her chew it over in her mind. You and Montgomerie

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go and check her flat, but don't discuss anything you find with her. We arrested her at about five P.M., I think?"

"Four forty-seven."

"Good man." Donoghue lit his pipe. "So we've got until four forty-seven tomorrow to charge her. We'll chat to her again in the morning. Meanwhile, I'll leave it with you. I have a wife and family in Edinburgh, I want to go home to them."

"Very good, sir."

Betty Pope's flat revealed itself to be two up in a quiet close in Lambhill. Inside it was dolls'-house neat, with cheap furniture, play furniture almost; a few framed paint-by-numbers pictures hung on the wall and half a dozen romance novels stood on the shelf. By their uncreased paperback spines Montgomerie assumed that they had not been read. The house was unimaginative, and good-little-girl neat.

"I tell you, Sarge, I can't see the occupant of this flat filling anybody in."

"I thought her room would be different, too," Sussock nodded in agreement, "but this is her drum all right. Nobody else lives here. I tell you, Montgomerie, she's a bad lot. We had a wee chat with her, next time it'll be a full-blown P.A.C.E. interview. Let's have a shuftie. I don't know what we are looking for, but we'll know it when we find it."

They found it in a drawer, in a drawer in the cheap chipboard and veneer dressing table. At the rear of the drawer was a ring binder which contained the pages torn from the ward log books and patients' records over a period of ten years. Also in the binder were death notices cut from the *Evening Times*. Each death notice was clipped to the appropriate page of the ward notes and patients' records, so that one name was represented by three pieces of paper clipped together.

There were twenty-seven paper clips. Montgomerie looked at Sussock. "She couldn't have killed twenty-seven people." He spoke softly. "Not that wee thing, not the occupant of this room. The occupant of this room is . . . well, pathetic."

Sussock leafed through the pages in the file. "It's a bit like the elephant and the Funnelweb, isn't it? You can make a relationship with an elephant, keep one as a working pet, huge as they are. The Funnelweb spider, you can fit one on your thumbnail, if it bites you you're dead within thirty seconds, no known antidote."

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"Small is deadly, is that what you're saying, Sarge?"

Sussock shook his head. "I don't know what I'm saying, Montgomerie, maybe I'm just an old man rambling on, maybe I can't cope with this. The wee nurse her mates used to refer to as Bo-peep is the same woman who's been quietly and efficiently killing people for twelve years and she would have carried on if that member of the public . . ."

"Mrs. Ruthven."

"Aye, Mrs. Ruthven, if she hadn't walked in off the street and told us what she suspected. See, people like Miss Pope, they're more frightening than the ones who kill for attention, the types who goad the police, the ones who play a 'catch me if you can' game."

"The theory is that that type really want to get caught."

"I can see that," said Sussock, "but right now we've got twenty-seven families to notify that their deceased relative was a murder victim."

"All elderly, Sarge?"

Sussock glanced through the cuttings. "Seventies, eighties, aye . . . all elderly, and that's how she got away with it. If she'd been nursing in the sick kids and tried this on, people would have sat up a lot earlier, or even in a general hospital, nursing middle-aged adults. But she's clever, chooses the golden oldies, nobody notices too much, appears normal to us that elderly people have sudden heart failure. Appears normal, so she could carry on."

"Normal," Montgomerie echoed. "Like this room. Notice anything?"

"A bit unimaginative. A bit childlike, but it's all here."

"It's dead, Sarge. It's a dead room, nothing out of place to make it come alive, no living thing either, no plants in pots, no pets, nothing is allowed to live in Betty Pope's world. It's like she has a need to kill."

"Well, let's leave all that to the trick cyclists, Montgomerie."

Sussock and Montgomerie returned to P Division. Sussock checked his pigeonhole and found a telephone message from a Mr. and Mrs. Pope in Edinburgh, concerned that their daughter had been arrested. They left an address and a phone number. Sussock showed it to Montgomerie. "Fancy a trip to Edinburgh?"

Montgomerie nodded. A quiet drive out on the M8 and back appealed to him.

"We don't have to see them," Sussock said. "She's an adult and

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all the rest of it, it's more for us than it is for them, it might let us know where she's coming from, it's the sort of background information that Fabian likes."

"Suits me, Sarge."

"I'll look through these names, make a short list out of the ones that were buried, we'll likely have to disinter them. Don't know the procedure for that, have to check the manual. Anyway, her parents live in Westerhailes, civilised side of the capital."

"Be there in an hour, Sarge, back in three."

Against all his expectations, Malcolm Montgomerie found himself liking Mr. and Mrs. Pope of Westerhailes, whose only child, now grown, was at that moment in a cell in the basement of the police station at Charing Cross. The Popes lived in a neatly kept high-rise flat, they had a glaring red carpet and white three-piece suite. Ornaments from Benidorm decorated the mantelpiece. Mr. and Mrs. Pope looked drawn with worry. They pressed a cup of tea on him, served on a tray in clean crockery, the choice of milk and sugar was left to him.

"See, to let you understand, Mr. . . ."

"Montgomerie."

"Aye, it's good of you to come and see us, so it is." Mr. Pope was ashen-faced.

"Our Betty . . ." Mrs. Pope began, but was instantly silenced by her husband's raised hand, not as if to threaten violence but more in the manner of a police officer raising a hand to halt traffic. Mrs. Pope made no further attempt to speak during Montgomerie's visit.

"To let you understand, Mr. Montgomerie, see, our Betty, she's our only child, but she was different, no, she wasn't, she . . . I can't put my finger on it, she . . . well, she was a normal healthy wee girl, just ordinary, interested in all the wee lassie things, dolls' houses and the like. Then when she was about ten she just stopped growing, just like that. Then, see, when that happened her attitude changed. She got upset at first and then she came out of that and took to doing exercises, ye ken, physical exercises that would make her grow, and when that didn't work her attitude changed again, then she became sort of withdrawn. Things began to die, plants in the bathroom began to wilt, new ones didn't survive, then my wife—" He pointed to Mrs. Pope— "She found Betty salting the soil. She wouldn't give a reason. Then there was a period when folks' animals were found battered, wee dogs in the

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main, found in a pool of blood near a high-rise in the scheme, as though someone had taken them up to the top floor and launched them into thin air."

"How often did that happen?"

"Four times over a period of about two years. That was when our Betty was a teenager."

"Nobody saw anything?"

Mr. Pope shook his head. "Then, some years after that, when our Betty was about seventeen, a baby in a buggy was taken from a shopping centre and it was found in the middle of the main road. I mean, the wean in the buggy was in the main road. The traffic stopped and the wean was rescued. Folk said they saw a young girl running away. The police questioned girls of about twelve or thirteen, but me and Sadie, we just knew that it was our Betty. And then there was the old man, old Mr. Fraser, our Betty would visit him in the days before she started nursing. Once, twice a week she'd visit him and run his messages, and then he was found with a plastic bag on his head. See, him, he wasn't the sort of guy to commit suicide. He had a lot of proud memories, he had friends and family. . . . Then our Betty went away to Glasgow to study to be a nurse; she said she wanted to help folk and I thought to myself, aw, hen, I hope you're being truthful. See, I felt as if a change had come over her when she'd stopped growing; she'd sort of become spiteful, ken? But that was ten, twelve years ago. . . . I thought that she was doing all right, doing well. . . . Then she phoned us up and told us that she'd been arrested for murder. What do you believe she's done, Mr. Montgomerie?"

"I'm not at liberty to tell you, Mr. Pope, but I will say that you may have been right to fear for the safety of her patients."

Mr. Pope began to whimper.

Ray Sussock drove to Priesthill Hospice. He went to Ballantrae Ward and sat with Sister McDuff in her office at the entrance to the ward.

"The staff are concerned." Sister McDuff was a grim-faced woman who seemed to be close to retirement; she appeared to him to be of his age group. "They're concerned for the patients. Nurse Pope has something of a reputation in this Health Authority. Where she goes, patients die. It's something of a jinx."

"It's probably more than that."

"I see." Sister McDuff didn't show any emotion. "If that is the

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when I'm on duty, but the night staff would have access. We have much medicine, as you see, mostly painkillers. No codantrium . . ."

"It won't be at the front of the cabinet," Sussock said. "If it is here at all, and used for the purpose we believe it to be used for, it'll be tucked away. . . ."

"At the back . . . here . . ." Sister McDuff reached for the bottle.

"Don't touch it, you'll smudge the latents."

"Latents?"

"Fingerprints." Sussock picked up the bottle by its neck between finger and thumb.

"That's an old bottle," Sister McDuff observed.

"She's probably had it many years." Sussock glanced around the room. "Do you have a plastic bag I can place it in?"

"Next door." They returned to Sister McDuff's office. She handed him a plastic bag. "Marks and Spencer all right?"

Sussock nodded; she had a sense of humour after all. "Would this be difficult for her to obtain?"

"Not at all, if she was in a hospital that used it. We had it by the gallon at the spinal-injuries unit, for example. Here she'd have to import it, as she has done. Leaving it in the medicine cupboard is clever, like hiding a tree in a wood."

Montgomerie returned to Glasgow. He wrote up the report of his visit to the Popes in Westerhailes and added it to the growing file on Betty Pope. Then he sat out the rest of a quiet shift, signed off at ten P.M., and returned to his flat off Highburgh Road. He let himself into his flat and entered his bedroom. He slipped out of his clothing and slipped under the duvet. Susan slid an arm around him and he held her.

"Good shift?" she asked sleepily.

"Routine," said Montgomerie. "Just routine." But the thought of a dwarf calmly and methodically murdering twenty-seven people chilled him.

Ray Sussock too let himself into his home. First the big front door of the old house and then up the stairs to the small door on the half-landing. He unlocked the door to his room and entered it. Some room for a man of his years—a bed, a chair, a wardrobe. He lay on the bed listening to a night bird, a starling, he thought, and he thought about Betty Pope and wondered if she had more victims than the twenty-seven they knew about, plus the elderly man in Westerhailes that Montgomerie had told him about, if it

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case, morale in the ward would be devastated, morale in the hospital, too."

"Have you had any unexpected deaths on this ward?"

"Two or three, all since Nurse Pope joined us and over a period of about two years."

Sussock began to wonder if Sister McDuff was utterly devoid of emotion.

"We had one four nights ago, in fact."

"Was Nurse Pope on duty?"

Sister McDuff consulted a rota which was pinned to her wall. "Yes, it was her last night shift. She had three days off and started on back shifts today. We were upset at the patient dying, his heart appeared to fail in the night."

"He was in the hospital for terminal care?"

"That's right, as are all our patients. This gentleman had lung tumours but was expected to live for quite some weeks longer and his heart was healthy. He was perhaps one of our more tragic cases, quite a lovely man, no known next of kin."

Sussock sat up. "So who arranged the funeral?"

"As in all such cases, we passed it over to the social services. They'll attempt to trace relatives and if they can't they'll arrange for a burial in a common plot."

"So his body is on ice somewhere?"

"Not on ice but a chilled room. Possibly still in our mortuary here in the hospital."

"How could we find out?"

Sister McDuff picked up the phone on her desk and pressed a two-finger number. "Hello, sister on Ballantrae here, do we still have the body of Mr. Agnew? We do . . . thank you." She replaced the phone. "As you have heard."

"Good, I shall have to ask our pathologist to take a look at it. But I don't think there is any need to disturb him this evening, we seem to put upon his patient nature too often. The next question is, do you have any codantrium on the ward?"

"Codantrium? We shouldn't have, not in a hospice, I can't see any use for it in a hospice. I used to work in a spinal-injuries unit and we issued codantrium there; the muscles round the lesion often used to stiffen and would have to be relaxed."

"Shall we have a look in your drug cabinet?"

Sister McDuff led Sussock to a small room adjacent to her office. She unlocked the door of a white cupboard. "I always keep the keys

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was down to her, but it did fit her offending profile. Life had turned against her, so she had turned against it, starting with potted plants, then folks' pet dogs, then a wean in a buggy, fortunately unsuccessfully, then an old man whom she had befriended and whom she may have intended to murder all along. She had then entered nursing and gravitated to elder care so that she had an endless supply of victims whose passing would not cause suspicion because of their age and apparent manner of death. It was, he pondered, as he struggled with the sheets, his one constant complaint about being a police officer: You can never feel sorry for yourself.

Wednesday, 10:00–13:05 hours

"I confess," Reynolds turned and smiled at Abernethy, "that this is one of the easiest postmortems that Mr. Donoghue has asked me to undertake. Not only is it during the working day, but we apparently know what we are looking for."

"Indeed, sir." Abernethy stood in the room in the mortuary of the Priesthill Hospital. In the room, on a stainless-steel table with a towel draped over his coyly termed "private parts," lay the corpse of the man with no known next of kin, who may have been Betty Pope's last victim.

"What we have to do is take a small muscle sample back to my lab for a biopsy, which . . . is . . . just . . . done. Good. Could you pass me that test tube? Thank you." Reynolds dropped the muscle sample into the tube and sealed the top. "Good. If you'd put it in my bag. Thank you." He paused. "Now, the second thing that we have to do is look for a small pinprick of a hypodermic syringe. Painkillers in the hospice are administered orally, so he shouldn't have a needle mark at all. If you wanted to inject someone without causing alarm, where would you stick the needle?"

"Arm, upper or lower, but in the arm, I think, sir."

"I would think so too." Reynolds peered closely at the right arm, drawing his fingers slowly over the skin from the shoulder towards the wrist. "And here it is. Nothing to see, just a small dark spot. Frozen into the skin as death occurred. I'll photograph it and append it to my report. If the biopsy is positive for codantrium then that and this pinprick is proof of murder."

Donoghue leaned back in his chair, calmly drawing on his pipe. Abernethy sat patiently in the chair in front of Donoghue's desk.

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Donoghue glanced at the clock on his wall: twelve o'clock midday. He returned his attention to the file on Betty Pope. He read Montgomerie's and Sussock's submissions, he read the ward notes and the pages from the deaths register which had been found in Betty Pope's flat, he read the fax from Dr. Reynolds confirming codantrium had been found in a large quantity in the muscle tissue of the deceased believed to be a Mr. Agnew, and he read Elliot Bothwell's report informing that Betty Pope's fingerprints had been found on the bottle of codantrium. Donoghue pondered Mr. Agnew's last moments, perhaps a call for a bedpan in the night, brought to him by Betty Pope, who obligingly drew the curtains round his bed and returned later to collect the pan, carrying with her a hypodermic syringe full of codantrium. "Something to help you sleep, Mr. Agnew?" did she say as she injected the drug and he trustingly let her? But no matter the state of his lungs, Mr. Agnew had an active brain, and as he lay there feeling his muscles turn to jelly, preventing him moving or crying out, his last sight before slipping into his final sleep was probably wee Betty Pope smiling at him, holding a syringe in her hands. "All right." Donoghue put the file down. He looked at Abernethy, young, inexperienced, but, he thought, made of the right stuff. "Let's go and have a chat with her."

Betty Pope climbed onto the chair and sat with a little-girl smirk, her hands under her thighs and her feet dangling in the air. Donoghue took two audio cassettes and removed them from their cellophane wrappers and put them in the tape recorder. He pressed the Record button and the red recording light glowed softly.

"The date," Donoghue said, "is the twenty-first of June; the time, 12:30 hours. I am Detective Inspector Donoghue of P Division. I am going to ask the other people in the room to identify themselves."

"DC Abernethy of P Division."

Betty Pope smiled.

"Will you say your name, Betty?"

Betty Pope instantly stopped smiling and looked up at the ceiling.

"Will you say your name, Miss Pope?"

"Betty Pope."

"You may have legal representation if you wish, Miss Pope."

"I don't want."

"Very well, just say if you want it and just say if the questions get too much. We've got all the time in the world."

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"I thought you had to let me go after twenty-four hours?"

"Not if we charge you. Do you know why you're in here?"

"Murder," she said with a smile. Abernethy caught his breath.

"Do you know whose murder?"

She shook her head vigorously, smiling an I-like-this-game smile, as if what Donoghue had said about being charged had not registered.

"Or how many?"

Another shake of the head.

Donoghue tapped his notepad. "Miss Pope, I've got a list of names here, names which may or may not mean anything to you, names taken from the pages torn from ward records and other similar books and which were found at your flat. They came from three different hospitals and span a twelve-year time period. All elderly people, all died of natural causes."

"So what am I doing here, then?"

"Because they didn't die of natural causes, did they? They died because you filled them full of a muscle relaxant, and because they didn't need it, all their muscles turned to putty, including their hearts."

"Did I?

"Yes, you did."

"Prove it."

"You're not so clever, Miss Pope. You're clever enough to know that by inducing heart failure in elderly people you could get away with murder and you probably knew that codantrium won't show up under normal tests. But it can be traced." Donoghue paused. "You know why you did this?"

"I didn't murder anyone, but tell me anyway."

"Because you like the attention, you like the buzz, you like the vibrancy, especially since you caused it."

"Prove it."

"If necessary. Ever heard of Baron von Munchausen?"

"No. Am I supposed to have murdered him too?"

"He's a guy out of German folklore. The story is that he used to go off for weeks at a time and returned to entertain people with tales of his adventures. Not bad, except they were all fiction, he'd spent the entire time sitting in a tavern in the next town, hadn't even left the locality. He did that because he loved people sitting round him giving him their undivided."

"So?"

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"Well, he gave his name to a medical condition called Munchausen's Syndrome. People who suffer from it poison themselves or injure themselves because they like the attention, they like the klaxons and the blue flashing lights."

"Oh yeah, fascinating, fascinating."

"It is actually quite fascinating. There's another version of the illness called Munchausen's by proxy, where the sufferer doesn't harm himself but harms others, making it look accidental. It generates a lot of excitement just the same, lots of attention, lots of emergency procedures going down, a lot of emotion to soak up."

Betty Pope's feet dangled in the air and she smiled a little-girl smile.

"Remind you of anybody?"

Betty smiled and swung her legs backwards and forwards.

"We had a wee chat with someone who knew you as a student, told us about the dead bird in the fridge and what was found under the grill and the post arriving late and double franked."

"I remember those things. We never found out who was behind it."

"I bet you didn't. So tell us, why is there a bottle of codantrium in the medicine cabinet of the ward in which you work?"

"Is there?"

"Your fingerprints are all over it. Nobody else's, just yours. And can you tell us why Mr. Agnew was found to be full of the stuff when he died in the night, a few nights ago, when you were on the night shift?"

"No, I can't. You tell me."

"I already have, because you filled him full of it, didn't you? Codantrium is detectable in corpses if you look for it."

A look of worry flashed across Betty Pope's eyes. Her smug confidence was beginning to evaporate.

"It won't be difficult to obtain exhumation orders to dig up those people on this list who were not cremated."

"But you don't have a witness to anything."

"We won't need one, not with this weight of evidence. Tell me and DC Abernethy about the old man in Westerhailes."

"What old man?"

"The old boy with plenty to live for who was found with a plastic bag over his head."

"Oh, him, I remember. He topped himself."

"Did he?"

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"Must have done."

"Pity nobody checked the plastic bag for your prints, especially since you were a regular visitor. So how many have you done in all told? Or have you lost count?"

Betty Pope looked pale. She blinked at Donoghue.

"And folks' pet dogs, dropped from high-rise tower blocks. Tell us about them."

"You have been digging up the dirt, haven't you?"

"It's our job, and we're quite good at it. So tell me about the dogs dropped to their deaths."

"Nothing to tell. Rumour had it they were dropped. But what sort of sick-minded individual would want to do that?"

"I don't know, what sort of sick-minded person would?"

"You can think what you like! You need more proof." Betty Pope's eyes began to fill. "You haven't enough proof to nail me. You'll need to let me go, I've been here nearly twenty-four hours."

"Miss Pope, did you hear what I said about charging you?"

"No . . ."

"I said we have to charge you or let you go within twenty-four hours of your arrest."

"But you've no witnesses."

"No need."

"But I thought there had to be witnesses."

"Betty Pope, I am going to charge you with the murder of Mr. Agnew. You'll be taken from here to the charge bar and the charge will be read."

"I thought there had to be witnesses. I want a lawyer."

"We'll get you one."

"To see me here?"

Donoghue shook his head. "He'll or she'll see you at Cornton Vale, you'll be held there pending trial, which will be within one hundred and ten days, has to be by law. We'll be out to see you as well, we've got twenty-six or -seven other people we'd like to chat to you about. Betty, there's some really heavy women at Cornton Vale, they don't take prisoners, that's where you'll find out you're only wee. The more help you give us, the easier the time you'll get."

But Betty Pope didn't seem to be listening, she seemed to Donoghue and Abernethy to be in a state of shock, or a state of absorbing an enormity, or a state of wishing herself a long way away, anywhere but her present whereabouts.

"The time," said Donoghue, "is 13:05. The interview is concluded."●

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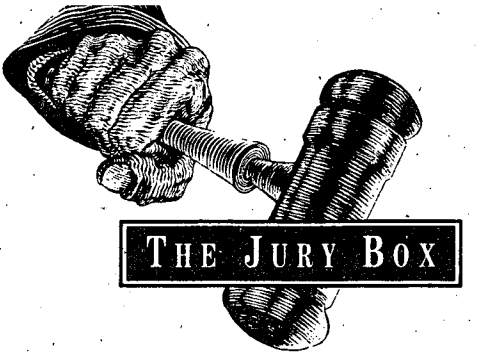

by Jon L. Breen

The domination writers of English have long enjoyed in the universe of detective fiction has both its advantages and its drawbacks for unilingual readers of English. While a wide range of British and American writers are available in translation to readers of other tongues, relatively little foreign mystery fiction, even by those writers most revered in their own countries, has been translated into English. Occasionally, we get a hint of what we're missing, as in the first three books reviewed below.

*** Akimitsu Takagi: *The Tattoo Murder Case,* translated from the Japanese by Deborah Boliver Boehm; Soho, $23. For a fifty-year-old novel published in English for the first time, the debut work of one of Japan's best-known mystery writers has remarkably trendy subject matter—it is packed with information about the process, effects, and aesthetics of tattooing, along with that art's ambivalent status in Japanese culture. Readers who relish the fascinating view of Japan in the immediate post-war era or the delightfully complex mystery puzzle will easily forgive the occasional repetitiousness and the inevitable stiltedness of some of the dialogue. (The use of anachronistic Americanisms like "Tell me about it" does nothing to help the latter problem, by the way.) More than the title suggests that Takagi's main influence was S. S. Van Dine—both the solution for the novel's locked-bathroom murder and the method amateur super-sleuth Kyosuke Kamizu uses to assess his suspects have clear origins in the cases of Philo Vance. (The only novel by Takagi previously published in the United States was *No Patent on Murder* [Playboy, 1977]. I, for one, would welcome more.)

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*** Jô Soares: *A Samba for Sherlock,* translated from the Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers; Pantheon, $23. In 1886, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, in Rio de Janeiro to investigate the theft of a Stradivarius from the Emperor's mistress, also become involved in the search for the brutal murderer of a series of young women—in fact, Holmes is credited by the author with inventing the term "serial killer." There's one major drawback: Sherlockians don't mind seeing their hero occasionally depicted as fallible, but making the Baker Street sleuth a slapstick bumbler of near-Clouseau proportions goes a bit too far. Still, the novel both entertains and instructs, thanks to period local color (authentic or not, the description of a revolting shark-fishing method especially sticks in the mind); fair-play clues to the culprit, and a translation that (of the three under discussion) is least translation-like.

*** Baantjer: *DeKok and Murder in Ecstasy,* translated from the Dutch by H.G. Smittenaar; Intercontinental, P.O. Box 7242, Fairfax Station, VA 22039; $9.95. An armored truck robbery results in the death of the driver, and a hunt for the missing mastermind proves more complex than it first seems. The novels about Amsterdam's Detective-Inspector DeKok feature admirably tricky plots, a strong sense of locale, and a likeably quirky central character, making their extreme popularity in Holland easy to understand. If you enjoy this one, the publisher has at least another fifteen DeKok titles available in the same trade-paperback format, with more promised for the future.

*** K.K. Beck: *We Interrupt This Broadcast,* Mysterious, $20. Two of this traditionalist author's greatest attributes, her wild sense of humor and her knack for unusual backgrounds, combine in the farcical account of a Seattle AM radio station that features classical music played by a cast of broadcasting misfits. The central character is lachrymose but plucky single mom Alice Jordan, reentering the workforce to replace a murdered advertising manager who had been running call girls as a sideline. Beck is one of the most consistently entertaining writers in the mystery field.

*** Margaret Maron: *Killer Market,* Mysterious, $22. The fifth novel about Judge Deborah Knott also makes good use of a specialized setting, the furniture business as reflected in High Point, North Carolina's annual International Home Furnishings Market. As always, Maron com-

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bines solid whodunit plotting with keen social insights.

** Burl Barer: *Capture the Saint,* The Saint Club c/o Jennara Wenk, 115 South Cherry St., Poughkeepsie, NY 12601-4215; inquire re price. Barer, who won a well-deserved Edgar for his impressively-written and incredibly exhaustive non-fiction guidebook *The Saint: A Complete History. . .* (McFarland, 1993), here sets Leslie Charteris's famed character, only slightly older than we remember, on the track of various ungodly in present-day Seattle. The principal mcguffin should appeal to old movie buffs: the Treasure of Dolores Costello. Most notable in this 600-copy signed limited edition pastiche is the faithful imitation of Charteris's arch, jocular, and (yes) sometimes irritating prose style. Many longtime Saint buffs will enjoy this, but if you're new to the character, only the original will do. (I was pleased to learn that the Saint Club, founded by Charteris for charitable purposes in 1936, still exists. In an introductory note, Honorary Secretary Ian Dickerson advises, "All proceeds from the sale of this book directly benefit the Saint Club's charitable activities.")

A new trade paperback omnibus, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles/The Secret Adversary* (Carroll & Graf, $12.95), offers in one volume Christie's first two novels, the debuts of Hercule Poirot, originally published in 1920, and of Tuppence and Tommy, dating from 1922. Though not her best books, they represent both her solid detection and comic thriller modes in embryo and feature the reader trickery that made her a mystery icon.

Another public-domain offering from the same publisher continues their mining of Rex Stout's early magazine writings from the teen years. With the cupboard bare of book-length serials to revive, *Target Practice* (Carroll & Graf, $5.95) gathers sixteen short stories, only six of which, including the World War I tale that gives the book its title, are actually new to book form. Providing no editorial commentary, dates, or context for the stories, this is for Rex Stout completists only. (My recommendation: check your library or used-book stores for the 1977 compilation *Justice Ends at Home and Other Stories* instead—it includes ten of the stories in the new collection, including the title novella which holds greatest interest for fans of Stout's detective fiction; and it provides original dates for the stories and a fine 20-page introduction by Stout biographer John McAleer.)

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An Evening With Fred and Rosemary

by Robert Barnard

One of the most highly regarded writers of mysteries in the classical style, Robert Barnard has been selected as special guest of honor to this year's Malice Domestic Convention, a gathering of mystery fans from all over the world which meets each year in Washington, D.C. He will be honored for work under his own name and the pseudonym Bernard Bastable.

"Oh, it looks like an invitation," said Mavis Biddulph when she had slit open the dazzling white envelope and taken out the card. "Who'd invite us? There's no wedding coming up in either of our families. . . . 'You are invited to an evening with . . .' Oh! Oh, Tom! Now I call that disgusting. Sick is the only word for it."

"What are you talking about, woman?" asked Tom Biddulph, from behind his copy of *The Sun*.

"Listen to this: 'You are invited to an evening with Fred and Rosemary, December 5th at 8 P.M. at Thirty-one Shepley Park Drive, Manfold.'"

Tom thought.

"But we don't know a Fred and Rosemary, do we?"

"Oh, Tom—*think* for once in your life. And then—this makes it worse—at the bottom he's written: 'Bring Kelly if she'll come.'"

"Kelly's sixteen. She'd never come to a party with her mum and dad," said Tom, who was still thinking of Freds and Rosemarys they might know. A second or two more and the penny had dropped. "Oh!"

"Exactly," said his wife, complacent at her superior quickness. "Now you see why I say it's sick."

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"It is a bit off, isn't it? Pretty poor taste. What did you say that address was?"

"Thirty-one Shepley Park Drive. It's the Malletts, Tom—in that big old Victorian terrace house with the basement. But we hardly know them."

"I wouldn't say that," said Tom, his mind now entirely weaned from *The Sun*. "You know her from the Women's Institute, and I meet him at the pub and the Conservative Club. Oh, we *know* them well enough. But I wouldn't have expected an off-colour idea like this from Tony Mallett."

"Well, it'll be him, not his wife. A woman would never think up a nasty scheme like this."

"The idea that women don't have nasty ideas or perverted tastes took a bit of a knocking at the trial," her husband pointed out.

"It's less than a month since she was sentenced," Mavis said. "And him making a nasty joke like that note about Kelly."

"I can tell you one thing: Kelly's not going," said Tom.

Mavis breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment there she'd thought he was going to say that they wouldn't be.

It wouldn't be true to say that they talked about little else in the week leading up to the party, but they did recur to it regularly in a way that showed it was in the back of their minds. They wondered who else had been invited (but didn't like actually to ask any of their friends). They wondered whether it would be a perfectly ordinary sort of party, and, if not, what sort of activities were planned. They wondered whether they would be forced to walk out as a protest at something outrageous or distasteful, though they half realized that the moral force of their protest would be lessened by their having gone along in the first place.

"Tony Mallett doesn't work in Leeds," said Tom Biddulph. "He's in the Treasurer's Department of Bradford City Council. Makes you think."

What it made him think he didn't divulge.

It was difficult to imagine what they might actually have worn for an evening at Fred and Rosemary West's. The mind boggled. When it came to the point all they could think of to wear was what they would have worn to any party, which for them meant wedding reception, funeral, or the Christmas party at the bookmakers for whom Tom worked. That meant Mavis's best dress and Tom's suit. They hoped it wouldn't make them conspicuous.

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When they arrived at Shepley Park Drive they realized that it wouldn't because another couple they didn't recognise was arriving at the same time, and they too could have been coming to a wedding reception, and they too showed similar signs of uncertainty, as if they were not particularly well acquainted with the bride or groom. Tony Mallett met them at the door and showed them in, rubbing his hands.

"Tom and Mavis, lovely to see you. Just my joke about Kelly, eh? Glad you realized that. Rory and Marie, great that you could come. You all know my wife Tricia, don't you?"

Tricia was a pretty little thing, with natural curly hair and a bubbly personality, rather younger than her husband, who was a well-set-up forty or so, with a neatly trimmed little moustache. There was a couple already there, Don and Theresa Caddie, and Mavis and Tom were on nodding acquaintance with them—they had a small secondhand bookshop just off the centre of Leeds. The couple they had met at the door, when they introduced themselves, turned out to be Rory and Marie O'Hare, and he apparently was a butcher in the next suburb to Tom and Mavis.

"Sit you down or stand up, whichever suits best," said Tony, irrepressibly genial. It occurred to Mavis that Fred was said by neighbours to behave just like that when they dropped in. "Now, let me get some drinks. The Ponsonbys should be here soon, and then we can have a really good thrash."

Some of them smiled rather uncertainly, but Tom and Don Caddie preferred to look austere and disapproving. Tom had a nasty sense that all reactions were being closely observed. Don felt that it was all in the worst possible taste, and all rather forced. And whoever these days called a party a "thrash"?

When the Ponsonbys arrived, exuding a restrained condescension (Max and Davina they were, tall and slim, and a cut above the others in their own estimation), things did not get less strained, though the feeling of anticipation grew. Something would have to happen, Tom thought, some explanation would have to be given. Tony, still ineffably genial, busied himself getting their drinks. There was a great variety and number of bottles—so *that* was all right: all needs and tastes were catered for. Tony did most of the talking, and seemed reconciled to the fact that he was likely to do so all evening.

"There you are—vodka and tonic. Enough tonic? That's right; don't want to drown it. I wonder what the Wests drank. Gin for

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Rosemary, I'd have thought. The traditional prostitute's drink. Oops—sorry, Mavis! No offence. Not *just* prostitutes, of course. And Fred? I'd have thought he was a beer man. Pretty conventional outside his . . . his tastes, was Fred. Maybe when they had someone there he wanted to impress he'd have a dry martini. I expect I'm just saying that because I can't stand the stuff. Max, what will you have?"

"Well, I was going to say dry martini," said Max Ponsonby, in a patent attempt to lighten the atmosphere. "But make it a whisky with plenty of ice."

Tony paused as he was putting together that last drink, his eyes distant.

"I often wonder how they came together," he said. "Not just how they met, but how they recognised each other. Hindley and Brady too. From different parts of the country, but somehow they came together, recognising each other as perfect partners. I see it as an 'across a crowded room' situation. Their eyes meet, something clicks, and they understand each other. Maybe they're watching something that stirs the feelings that have always been there beneath the surface. . . . Two vicious dogs fighting to the death, eh, Tom?"

He looked at Tom Biddulph. A memory flickered inside Tom. A visit with household rubbish to the corporation dump, and on some waste ground between tips an Alsatian and a Staffordshire bull terrier fighting—on and on, and the owners laughing and taking bets. . . . He stared stonily ahead.

"Of course, I may be romanticising the whole business," resumed Tony Mallett. "There are places you can go where you reveal your . . . tastes pretty nakedly. Organised dog fights, cock fights, certain cinema clubs . . ." He looked around him genially, naming no names. "You can buy literature, to give it its courtesy title, in a certain sort of shop: for example, that place in Upper Briggate that's been closed down now." Again he looked around.

"Nobody respectable would be seen dead in a place like that," Theresa Caddie said stoutly.

"Certainly when I've been there everyone seems to be that bit furtive," agreed Tony. "Your porn is a bit more upmarket, isn't it? Don't have to be so undercover about it in your shop. But as adults we're still very shy about revealing our tastes, aren't we? Particularly people of our age. We were more open about it as children. The school bully doesn't do much to hide the fact that he

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enjoys the hurt he's inflicting. Some people still imagine bullying only goes on in boys' schools. How wrong they are!" He looked around, still smiling. "Eh? Aren't they wrong? Boys' schools, girls' schools, co-ed schools. It goes on, doesn't it? All the time."

"If you're referring to me—" began Rory O'Hare and Davina Ponsonby simultaneously.

"Oh, I wasn't referring to anyone, male or female. Besides, what is a spot of bullying? The trouble with youngsters these days is that they're cocooned—they're not prepared for life as it really is, so when they get into the real world they go to bits when they're faced with it."

"They've certainly got it made, compared to our day," grumbled Tom.

"Haven't they ever! They've not just got it made, they've got the upper hand!" Tony's voice was rising with indignation. "They're in charge! It's unnatural. Just think about it. A hundred years ago schoolmasters in the course of a day's work were doing things to boys that would get them several years in jail today."

"The pendulum has swung too far," agreed Don Caddie.

"Of course it has. Naturally I'm not suggesting anyone should go as far as Rosemary West. I'm just saying it's time parents asserted their rights over their children. And that means the right to keep them in line by punishing them."

"Well, naturally we make Kelly clean up her room if it's a right tip, and we've had to ground her at weekends now and again," said Mavis. There was a second or two's silence.

"That wasn't quite what I was thinking of," said Tony.

"Naturally I cuff my two when they step out of line," said Rory, who had a butcher's build. "If this were effing Sweden they'd probably be straight down to the police station to dob me in for it."

"We're heading in that direction here," Tony assured him.

"But, speaking generally, the trouble is that life has become too *tame,*" said Max Ponsonby, all suave and newly-in-the-money. "You mustn't do this, you mustn't do that. People have instincts that aren't being catered for, are having to keep them in, keep them down. They knew what they were doing in the olden days, when there were public hangings, the stocks, bearbaiting—they satisfied a part of ordinary people: a vital part that you're supposed to be ashamed of these days. Well, I, for one, am not."

"Too right," said Rory O'Hare.

"They order things better in the Moslem countries," said Tony.

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"But there's no way Britain is going to go in that direction."

"I don't see why not," said Max. "America is."

"Well, we'll all be well on towards senility before anything like that happens here," said Tony. "Till then . . ."

There was another moment of stillness.

"What do you mean, till then?" asked Max Ponsonby, tension in his voice.

"Well, it's hardly reasonable to expect us to sit around waiting for the State to satisfy perfectly normal, natural tastes, is it? The question for all of us is: What are we going to do till then?"

There was a spluttering sound from Tom, who was the most conventional of the group.

"You're not suggesting we do anything illegal?"

"I am."

"But . . . but . . . Well, you can count me out. I've got too much to lose."

Tony smiled, pityingly.

"Respectability. Nice home. Boring job with a regular income. Oh, we've all got those. And to keep them you're prepared to remain a repressed virgin?"

"Hey, that's dirty talk."

"Because that's what you'll be if you've never *done* what you so want to do. Of course, I'm not suggesting we go as far as Fred and Rosemary. You know me."

"That's the trouble. We don't," said Tom.

"But what we could do is dabble, don't you think? And get a lot of enjoyment from the process."

"Dabble?" said Max, flicking his tongue around his lips. "I think you should be a bit more specific. What have you in mind?"

"Well, of course, there must be a lot of different tastes here, so in the long run we'd have to go for a variety of different . . . experiences. We could cater for all tastes, and I should think we would all get a bit of a boost from all of them. We could even do some good. Now take prostitutes, for example. I think everyone would agree there are some parts of Leeds that are an absolute disgrace."

"*That's* true," said Theresa Caddie. "It's shameful just driving through parts of Chapeltown."

"We shouldn't be wanting for potential . . . entertainment, then," said Tony Mallett, looking round the room. One or two of his listeners swallowed.

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"Spell it out!" said Don Caddie. There was excitement in his voice.

"One of us drives there. Another hides in the back. The driver makes the proposition. She gets in the front seat. As the driver drives off she feels tape over her mouth—they read the papers, she'd know immediately—then her arms are pinioned, she's blindfolded." He paused. "She's entirely at our mercy."

Max leaned forward.

"Then?"

"Then we take her somewhere—I volunteer this house, or the basement thereof—and then we . . . play games with her."

This time there were faint sounds of stirring, part uneasiness, part excitement.

"What sort of games?" asked Rory.

"All sorts. I fancy games with knives. You'd have a fine collection of sharp ones, wouldn't you, Rory? Cutting into the fleshy parts—nothing dangerous, nothing deadly, but very painful, and very, very frightening. And we'd never remove the blindfold, and we'd say practically nothing. Then we'd drive her around town and dump her somewhere."

There was silence as they considered this. They were halfway to acceptance.

"Couldn't say they didn't ask for it, these tarts," said Rory.

"But—" began Mavis.

"And then there's children. We all feel strongly about them, I can tell. The whole world's gone topsy-turvy. But we've got to go carefully. Start disciplining a teenager all of a sudden and they'll march off to the police station. We've got to start earlier. Condition them, accustom them, as a Victorian child would have been accustomed: That's what happens to you if you step out of line. That's how the Wests did it. We'd start with fairly light punishment—but enjoyable, stimulating. And as they get older we'll go on to . . . more serious stuff."

He paused, looking round at all the faces, registering sharp bright gleams in some of their eyes.

"And then there's animals." Definite stirrings in one of the seats. "You can do things to animals you can't do to humans because nobody cares. They're doing it all the time in laboratories. You can pick up stray dogs on any old council estate and no questions asked. No need to blindfold him—he won't be squealing on us. We could bring him here, or take him somewhere nice and

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lonely—Saddleworth Moor, maybe. And we could—"

"NO!"

Theresa Caddie had stood up. Absurdly, Englishly, there had to be a breaking point, and for her it had come with the mention of dogs.

"No," she said firmly. "I think that's just disgusting. I love dogs. I love most animals. And I'll tell you one thing: They may be dumb, but they don't have the sort of sick tastes that you obviously have. Come on, Don."

Don was not the only one to stand up. Quickly or slowly they realized that as soon as one had broken ranks, that was the end of it all. Whatever they might have ended up doing could not now be done. The moment Theresa had marched through the hall and out of the front door, their security was over. It behooved them, they thought, to make noises of outrage as they left. "Absolutely disgusting"—"Can't understand how anybody could suggest"—"Sick, sick, sick"—"Talk about perverted." Muttering their various litanies of dissociation from what had gone before, they put down their drinks, collected their coats, and disappeared into the night and their cars, not even bothering to say goodbye or to thank their hosts.

When they had gone, Tony Mallett came back into the sitting room, leant his head against the door, and laughed and laughed.

"Oh boy! Was I on the right lines! Till the crunch point they were lapping it up."

Tricia giggled.

"They certainly seemed interested."

"Interested! They were fascinated. Like by a snake. I'd really picked the interested ones, hadn't I? One thing about being a special constable: You get to recognise criminal types."

"Mind you, it takes one to recognise one," said his wife.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only with you it's more psychological. You like playing with people, you like making them uneasy, then distressed, then really upset."

He pulled her to him.

"There's someone I'm certainly wanting to play with at this moment." He took a curl of her hair and twisted it round his finger. "Maybe I did get a sexual buzz out of it. At least my tastes are subtle, anyway. Come on—let's go upstairs." He led her, arm around her tightly, up the narrow Victorian staircase. "But I'll tell

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you one thing," he said, "they'll be shit-scared after this. I've really put a rat up their trouser legs. Whatever they might once have done to satisfy their nasty proclivities, now they'll sheer away from it like from a dog with rabies. I've done a public service. As they say, crime prevention is better than crime detection."

"And you got a buzz out of it that . . . well, sticks out a mile," thought Tricia.

As they made their separate ways home, largely silent, one or two positively red-faced in the darkness, the couples for the most part exemplified the truth of Tony Mallett's boast. They felt terrible—grubby, exposed, shamed even to their partners. It was an evening they would never want to talk about. They would always be scared when any of the details about what was suggested occurred to their minds, as assuredly sometimes they would. Lying sleepless that night in the darkness, they felt ashamed and they felt terrified, as if they had done something filthy and embarrassing in public.

Except one. One of the eight lay there in the darkness and thought: He was right. Unless you've done it, it's like you're still a virgin. That's what really turns you on, but you've just read books and looked at pictures, and that's *all*. He's right. Unless you've done it, you're only half a man. Unless you've done it . . ." He turned over, and as he lay there in the darkness the rhythm of his thoughts changed. Now it had become: "I've got to do it. Got to do it." ●

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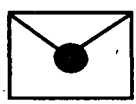

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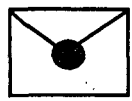

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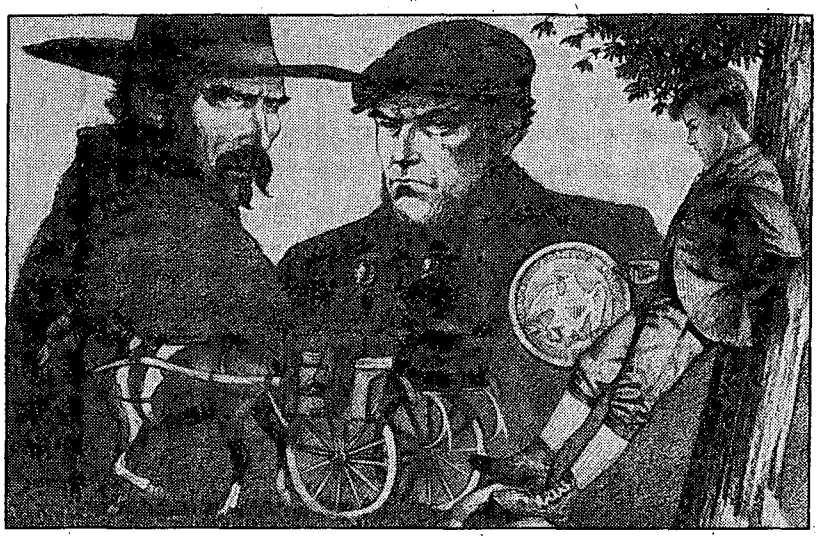

Art by Laurie Harden

Two Bits

by Jan Burke

On the hot July day on which he reached his majority, Andrew Masters came into a handsome fortune, yet at three o'clock that very afternoon he was focusing his attention on a twenty-five-cent piece. His contemplation of this infinitesimal portion of his wealth took place beneath a large, shady tree near Jefferson Road, just outside the western Pennsylvania town whose oil fields had made his father rich. His father had not owned the oil, but in his youth he had developed a special pump that oilmen needed. In the early 1870s, during the Pennsylvania oil boom that followed the war years, the oilmen had bought a great many pumps, bailers, cables, and other equipment from Mr. Masters, so that his oil tool and supply company became one of the largest in the country. With a shrewd eye for a good investment, his riches increased.

His charming manners and unflagging industry made him appealing to a handsome woman who came from an excellent and

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well-to-do family. Her family did not approve of the match; they were horrified when the young couple defied them by eloping. While Andrew's maternal grandparents had sworn never to allow his mother to inherit a cent, they had softened their hearts upon Andrew's birth—hence the fortune their first grandson now found at his disposal.

Yet it was upon twenty-five cents and not his several millions that young Andrew meditated now. He had spent the last few hours beneath the tree, knowing that he was not delaying any family festivities; there would be no cake or candles, no champagne or caviar. In the Masters family, this date had not been celebrated as Andrew's birthday since the day Andrew turned seven. For more than a dozen years, the first day of July had been commemorated only as "The Day We Lost Little Charlie."

Andrew himself thought of it in this way, and was as silent and stiff with remembered grief as were his parents. The manner in which his younger brother Charlie was taken from the family was destined to make this day infamous to all who remembered the events of fourteen years ago, and if there were fewer and fewer persons who recalled it, the Masterses would never be numbered among those who had forgotten.

" 'Two Bits' is set in western Pennsylvania in the late nineteenth century," said Jan Burke in her letter to *EQMM*. "It's inspired by stories I read while researching *Hocus*, the newest book in my Irene Kelly mystery series." The Irene Kelly series, published by Simon & Schuster, shouldn't be missed by fans of this bestselling author and former *EQMM* Readers Award winner. ¶

On his seventh birthday, Andrew sat beneath this same old oak tree. In his mind's eye, he could even now clearly see Charlie, a cherub-faced five-year-old, extending his small hand toward his brother and saying, "For your birthday, Andrew. I want you to have it."

In the hand was a small, unpainted wooden soldier, one whittled from a scrap of pine by Old Davey, the head groom of Papa's fine stable. Compared to the mechanical tin clown or the horsehair

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rocking horse up in their nursery, it was a poor sort of toy, but Andrew had coveted it. Still, he resisted temptation.

"Thank you, Charlie," he said. "But I can't take it away from you. Old Davey gave it to you."

Their conversation was interrupted by the rattle of an old buggy coming up the road. The horse was sturdy but unremarkable, while the buggy was out-and-out shabby, nothing like the smart surrey or the four-in-hand drag or any of the other fine carriages owned by the Masterses. This particular buggy was not unknown to the boys, for they had seen it only a week before. Andrew smiled, soon recognizing the two men in the buggy as those who had given them four peppermint sticks and a dozen pieces of taffy on that occasion. Mama did not approve of this sort of cheap candy, and the brothers had delighted in secretly consuming these confections not an hour before their supper.

"Hello, boys!" the driver called, pulling up. "Ain't ya lookin' fine today." Andrew could not return the compliment. The driver, who had told them his name was Jack, was a short man whose dark hair curled wildly around the edges of his cap. His bushy eyebrows put Andrew in mind of a caterpillar race. One of his eyeteeth was missing, and the remainder of his smile was tobacco stained. The man sitting next to him appeared to be a stretched-out version of the driver, tall and thin, but with the same brows and fewer teeth. Jack introduced him as Phil. "Me and Phil is brothers, jest like you two. C'mon and join us, we're gonna buy us some fireworks!"

As Independence Day was only three days away, Charlie thought this would be a splendid adventure. Andrew hesitated. "I'll ask Mama," he said.

The men laughed. "Yer a mama's boy, ain't ya?" the thin one chided.

"Come on," Charlie urged him. "It will be a secret, just between us two!"

Andrew, who could only resist so much temptation in one day, gave in to this one. The men helped the boys up into the dusty conveyance, and crowded in after them. Andrew sat between the men, while Phil held Charlie awkwardly on his lap. They were hardly settled when Jack snapped the reins. The buggy lurched forward and they traveled at a quick pace down the road.

Andrew began to regret his decision almost immediately. The buggy was not well sprung, and its jolting motion jarred his teeth.

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Phil and Jack, he thought, had not bathed in weeks. When they reached the road that would take them a short distance into town, Jack turned the wrong way. Andrew told him so, which brought a sharp look from Phil, but Jack merely explained that if they bought the fireworks in a place where his family was so well known, someone would likely tell his father all about it. Imagining his father in an angry mood was enough to curtail further protest from Andrew.

The road smoothed a little, and Jack began to sing certain songs, those which he undoubtedly knew to be of a nature guaranteed to intrigue small, well-mannered boys, and Andrew and Charlie eagerly took up the task of learning the melodies and (most especially) the lyrics of these odes to bodily functions. They had never heard the like before, not even from Old Davey, whose sporadic bouts of cursing they had been thrilled to overhear on a few memorable occasions.

After a time, though, Andrew's enthusiasm waned and he began to look around him. He was unfamiliar with his surroundings, and began to worry that they had been gone too long. Phil, he noticed, was eyeing him in an unfriendly fashion.

Jack seemed to notice this, too, and said, "Nearly there, Phil. Don't git yerself huffed."

Phil grunted and sat back.

"Lookit here," Jack said, pointing ahead. "There's the little town we been lookin' for. Firecrackers'll be sold at a place jest on t'other side of town."

It was not much of a town, and Andrew thought he would be happy to be finished with their mission and on his way home again. To his surprise, though, Jack halted the buggy, pulling up across the street from a small store.

"Andy," Jack said, "Charlie here says it's yer birthday. Z'at true?"

Andrew nodded.

"Well, I think Mr. Andy here should get something special, then, don't you agree, Phil?"

"Sure," Phil said.

Jack reached into one of his pockets and produced a small coin purse, and from this, a quarter. He handed the coin to Andrew and said, "Go on, there's a store right over there. Spend it on anything you like. Two bits, jest for yerself."

One might think that a child raised among the luxuries of the

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Masters household might snub a mere twenty-five cents, but it was, in fact, the first coin that had ever been given to Andrew. Nothing so mundane as legal tender had ever before been allowed within his grasp: all purchases, all exchanges of money, were in the hands of his elders and their employees. Never before had he enjoyed anything that might be called his own money.

He glanced up from the coin to see a look of envy on his brother's face. He knew what he saw there well enough—from not long after the day Charlie was born, Andrew had often worn that look of envy. The fair-haired, sweet-tempered Charlie was more often in favor with his parents and the servants than was Andrew, who tended to be what Mama called "a willful child." This look of envy, coming from Charlie, was almost exclusively limited to those rare occasions when the boys were visited by their grandparents, the only people who looked upon Andrew with anything resembling favoritism. And now, staring at the shiny coin, Charlie was positively green.

For Andrew, the quarter's value grew.

"Go on," Jack was saying. "We'll wait here for you."

"I wanna go with you," Charlie cried as Jack helped Andrew down from the buggy.

"It's *my* birthday," Andrew said, turning his back on his brother, skipping his way to the store.

The store was of a type his parents would undoubtedly disdain. The windows were dusty, as were the tops of many of the jars and cans on the shelves. But to a boy of seven with two bits in his pocket, it was a palace of curiosities: buttons and ribbons, pencils and pipes, razors and soap—all received Andrew's study. He held his hands behind his back, not wanting to bring about the wrath of the palace's king, a sturdy balding man who stood behind the counter.

The proprietor, seeing the fine quality of the material and workmanship in Andrew's cap, shirt, knickerbockers, and silver-buckled shoes (few of his adult customers wore footwear as fine as the boy's), and noting the youth's quiet politeness, was himself all patience and kindness. Indeed, these were hard, lean years, and it would serve no purpose to turn away any customer. This boy's mother would be along soon, he thought, rubbing his hands together.

Andrew continued to stroll slowly through the narrow aisles. The air in the store was redolent with what he found to be an

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unusual mixture of scents: tobacco, leather, coffee, cheese, peppermint, and vinegar. He saved for last an examination of the jars on the counter—horehound candy, licorice, and all manner of other delights.

But each potential purchase was quickly dismissed as one other thought continued to occur to Andrew: taking home a piece of horehound candy or a peppermint would mean parting with his quarter. His lovely, shining quarter, with its full-figured Liberty seated in flowing robes, its eagle on the back. His hand closed tightly around it. No, it was his two bits.

It occurred to him that he need not spend his quarter in this store on this day, and the more he considered this idea, the better he liked it. The quarter itself was a prize, and if Charlie should nettle him, he would pull the shiny coin from his pocket and hold it before his younger brother. This thought of Charlie made him mindful of the fact that he had been in this store for quite some time now, and that Jack and Phil—especially Phil—might be angry with him for dawdling. He suddenly found himself uneasy over having left Charlie with only those two coarse men to keep him company. He bid the dismayed shopkeeper good day and left the store.

He was startled to find the street nearly empty and the sun much closer to the horizon. He controlled a growing panic only by telling himself that Charlie and the men had undoubtedly tired of waiting for him and had moved on to wherever the fireworks were being sold. He hurried down the street in the direction they had been traveling. After a few yards he began to run, but quickly reached the limits of the small town without seeing any sign of Charlie and the men.

Out of breath, he walked a little farther, feeling by turns angry and betrayed, then frightened for his brother, then worried and very alone. In this tumult of emotion his active imagination conjured up a variety of explanations for his situation:

—They had grown tired of waiting for him, bought the firecrackers, and were now journeying back to Jefferson Road. (A vision that left him wondering why they hadn't called to him, or fetched him from the store.)

—Charlie had become ill, and the men had rushed him to a doctor's office. (Which led to a fruitless search among the few buildings of the small town.)

—The men had taken a different road back into town, had

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called at the store and learned that Andrew had already left, and were at this moment on the way home. (That this situation was his own fault, he was too ready to believe.)

—Charlie, angry over the gift of the quarter, had urged the men to trick Andrew, and they were at this moment laughing as they drank cool glasses of lemonade in the shade of the old oak. (Too unlike Charlie.)

Andrew, although cosseted and sheltered, was not a stupid child, and one last possibility took hold of his young mind. Perhaps the men had tricked both boys, and for reasons Andrew could not fathom, had stolen Charlie.

He felt hot tears fill his eyes, but dashed them away quickly. He wanted no harm to come to his brother, but he did not know what to do next. The thought of returning home without Charlie was unbearable.

He began to ask the few people he met on the street if they had seen Charlie or the men. Invariably, they had not. To his surprise, they were rude and brusque in their answers. These were hard people, he thought, nothing like the folk who surrounded him at home. The town and its few inhabitants suddenly seemed mean and low to him. He went back to the one place where he had been treated with courtesy.

The shopkeeper was less friendly this time, but politely told him that he knew nothing of anyone named Phil or Jack, had not seen a five-year-old boy named Charlie. When asked if he knew where firecrackers were sold, he proclaimed one could find them locally only in Andrew's hometown.

"Would you please take me there?" the boy asked.

"Take you there? I suppose I'm to close my shop and hire a rig?"

"My father would be willing to . . ." He stopped before saying "pay you" because the phrase made him realize why the men might have stolen Charlie. His father would pay for Charlie's return—but Andrew, much cast down, certain he would be blamed for all that had gone wrong, wasn't sure his father would want his willful eldest son back at all.

"I'm sure your father would be willing to take you wherever you like," the store owner was saying, "but I can't leave my place of business."

"Please, sir, how far am I from Jefferson Road?"

"By the main road? About ten miles. Of course, as the crow flies, it's only about three."

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"Which way does the crow fly?"

The man laughed. "Oh, westward over the oil fields, I suppose."

Andrew brightened a little at this. His father had taken him to the oil fields twice, most recently just two days ago. The oilmen knew his father. He might see someone there who would help him return home.

He thanked the proprietor and began walking toward the forest of wooden derricks he had seen on the way into town. When he reached them, he again became frightened. Although the paths between the derricks had the same sharp fragrance of oil-soaked wood and earth, there was no sign of the bustling activity he had seen at the other oil field, the one he had traveled to with his father. Here equipment was still and rusty with disuse, the drilling platforms damaged and empty. The wooden buildings attached to the derricks, which he knew to be called doghouses, were rickety and missing boards. Even the small offices and equipment shacks appeared to be abandoned. He remembered his father talking of wells that were dry, and wondered if this was an oil field full of such wells.

He told himself that he would sooner or later find other people, and walked toward the sun. Close up, the distance between the wells was greater, and the derricks seemed much taller. They loomed over him, silent giants which began to look identical.

His feet started to ache, and then to throb and burn, but still he walked toward the sun. That the distance he must travel to reach his home was nearly double the shopkeeper's estimate would not have mattered to him. He was thirsty and tired, but he continued to place one foot before the other, the sound of his steps a counterpoint to his troubled thoughts. He walked over hills whose shade was welcomed but confusing to his sense of direction. Coming to one rise, he at last saw the more familiar sight of an active field. He could not run, but began to shout for help as he drew closer and closer. One of the men, who was climbing high on a distant derrick, noticed him and pointed. Soon, two men rode horses to where he stood, swaying on his feet, exhausted more by his emotions than his exertions.

"Why, it's the Masters boy!" one of the men shouted, leaping down from his horse.

"Charlie," Andrew said, beginning to cry. "They stole Charlie."

At first, his parents rejoiced in his return. They had spent several

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hours alarmed by the discovery that their children were not playing under the tree and could not be located anywhere on the large property. They could not know that by the time the attic and stables had been searched, Jack had already given Andrew his quarter.

They wept over Andrew when the oil-field boss brought him home, and had not remonstrated against him. But quickly their alarm returned; their fears for Charlie were expressed in recriminations hurled at his older brother, who should have known better than to get into a strange conveyance, who should have known better than to leave his brother for a quarter.

"Two bits!" Papa shouted. "Even Judas held out for forty pieces of silver!"

His mother intervened then, and separated them by taking Andrew to his room. But soon there were police to be answered, and not much later the detectives from Pinkerton's, and over time, endless others. Tough men, large men, ill-mannered men, always badgering him for descriptions and repetition of details, making unpleasant suggestions as to how it might have truly happened that Andrew was spared. Under this assault, details became confused in Andrew's mind, memories shifted, and to his father's fury, he could not name the town—or be certain of the roads, or how far he had traveled. Eventually the store he had visited was located, but as Andrew could have told anyone who might have listened, no one in that town had noticed Charlie and the two men.

A ransom note, postmarked from Pittsburgh, arrived three torturous days later. The letter, filled with misspellings, was eventually deciphered to be a demand for twenty thousand dollars, details of payment to be forthcoming. Papa declared himself ready to pay.

By now, newspapers were publishing stories of "Little Charlie Masters," whose brother had abandoned him to kidnappers. This was, of course, not at all what the papers intended to convey, but it was how every story appeared to Andrew.

During this time Andrew slept and ate little, cried easily, and was prone to nightmares of the worst sort. He could not help but notice that his parents no longer looked him in the eye, that the servants whispered. Had not Grandpapa arrived to protect him from his persecutors, and threatened to remove their one remain-

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ing son from their home, the Masters might not have gone on as a family through the ordeal that awaited them.

The instructions never came. The explanation for the failure of the kidnappers to continue on their course was not uncovered until an enterprising Pinkerton's man compared descriptions of Jack and Phil with two robbers gunned down by police in Pittsburgh on the day the letter had been received. As he lay dying, one of the men—Jack, it seems—had said, "Never find Charlie now."

Questioning of the men's few known associates yielded nothing. The detectives advised the Masterses to assume their son was dead.

Never one to give up, Papa announced to the newspapers that he was offering forty thousand dollars—an astronomical sum, twice the amount demanded by the kidnappers—to anyone who returned his son Charlie to him. Other than renewed publicity and attention, nothing came of it.

Over the years following Charlie's kidnapping, Andrew learned to calmly accept his altered position in the family. His parents could not punish the kidnappers, so they punished the person they had come to view as an accomplice. They used the weapon of choice for persons of their breeding and social stature—civility. Andrew was accorded this, but little more. Charlie, by contrast, took on in memory saintly attributes he never had in life, became the perfect son denied to them. His room was enshrined, his toys left waiting for his return.

On Andrew's eleventh birthday, the one-hundred-fourth pretender (by Andrew's careful accounting) arrived at the Masters home. He was easily dismissed as yet another boy put forward by some schemer as "Little Charlie." There were always stories to go with these pretenders—of how the missing boy's "adoptive" parents had taken pity on some feverish waif who had then forgotten all of his previous life until just this moment—but Andrew could not bear to listen to another one. He asked Old Davey to saddle his favorite mare, then rode toward the town where Charlie had disappeared.

This time he did not venture into the town itself, where he had become a familiar and pitied sight, but turned off into the abandoned oil field. He rode slowly, and at times dismounted to take a closer look at some object. At last his search was, at least in one

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sense, rewarded. He spent another hour or two at the site, then rode home. That he was filthy and had ruined his clothes either escaped his parents' notice, or was (more likely) not thought to be worthy of their comment.

This he did not mind.

Now, as he stood beneath the oak on his twenty-first birthday, he put the quarter back in his pocket and removed a second object. It was a crudely whittled soldier, weather-beaten and oil-stained, found near an abandoned well.

The well was a disposal well, used to hold oil-contaminated water and sludge pumped from other wells. It was about sixteen inches in diameter: too narrow for an adult, perhaps too narrow even for a schoolboy, but not too narrow for the body of a small child. He had known that it would be useless to look down it for Charlie's remains; the well would be too deep.

Andrew had never been able to picture Phil and Jack planning to endure a child's company while waiting for ransom; if they had left Charlie with someone else while they robbed houses, that person would have long ago claimed his father's reward money. No genuine claimant had stepped forward.

Fourteen years had passed since Charlie disappeared, and the pretenders were growing fewer, but before the end of his father's life, Andrew's count of them would reach two hundred eighty-six. On this day, he did not yet know that number, but he did know what had happened to his brother. On this day, he simply rested in that knowledge, and took his revenge in his silence.

"Thank you for the birthday present, Charlie," he said, tucking away the second—and only other one—he had received since the day he turned seven. ●

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The Burning of the Temple

by Batya Swift Yasgur

No, I'm not a detective. I'm not from the police or the insurance company. Those guys all came and went, asked their questions, took their photographs, and left shaking their heads and muttering things about no evidence. Fools.

Now I'm the one asking the questions. Why? Well, because it just happens to be my house that burned down last night, that's why. And because it's time for Jack to come up with some answers.

Few are the writers who can construct a crime story in a few hundred words. The short short is Batya Swift Yasgur's forte, as she proved with her award-winning story of 1994, the five-page "Me and Mr. Harry." Ms. Yasgur is capable of writing at greater length too; indeed, she is currently at work on a novel. ¶

Outside the charred rubble that was once our dream house, I stand next to Jack. He's been hit hard by this, he's completely undone. Face unshaven, clothing disheveled and mismatched (he'd pulled a plaid work shirt and pinstriped suit pants out of his closet when he ran out of the house, the flames in hot pursuit). His head is clutched in his hands. His dream, days and nights of tireless labor, is in ashes.

Just last night, we were lying in each other's arms. Our first night in our new home, the house he lovingly designed (Jack's an architect), the house I had painstakingly decorated (I'm an interior decorator). Tangible symbol of our love. "Our first baby," Jack had called it as we lay beneath the mauve quilt in our new mauve and grey bedroom which I had so carefully coordinated. Last night, murmurs of love; today, cries of mourning as last

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night's whispers sizzled and coughed into smoke.

"Let's go over a few things again," I say.

He looks at me grimly. "The police went over everything."

My gaze meets his, the dark fires of his eyes reflecting mine. "Not quite."

"What do you mean?" His voice is dull. "We know it wasn't the wiring. Frank and Mike are two of the best electricians around, and they inspected the place thoroughly, I saw to that myself. No appliances yet, stove wasn't lit, neither of us smoke—"

Here's my opportunity. "No. But someone else does."

He stiffens visibly. "What do you mean?"

"Come off it, Jack. You got a call last night after we—"

"I told you." In an impatient voice. "It was Arlene."

"Why would your secretary call you at home at night?" I feel flames of anger singe my face.

"To say congratulations on the new home."

My voice pierces the smoky veil of his lie. "I heard it all. All."

That sends the color racing to his cheeks. "What—what—"

"We *did* have one appliance turned on, remember? The answering machine. On two-way record."

"And . . . ?"

"And I know everything. All those sighs and 'I love you's' and 'I miss those nights when we worked together.' Those long nights, when I thought you were staying late, working on plans for *our* house. And you were with *her.*"

"Annie—"

I flinch, as if he'd thrown a lit match at my arm. "Don't 'Annie' me! Your precious secretary, your little affair, she must have snuck in and thrown away one of her cigarettes. Destroyed everything. Our home, our lives."

"But Annie, I was at my mother's all night."

I gasp when I hear her voice. There's the nasty bitch herself. "What the hell are you doing here?" I demand.

"I came right away when I heard about the fire," she begins.

"Gracious of you." My voice drips sarcasm, like wax from a candle.

"It certainly is." Jack takes Arlene's arm protectively.

I ignore his outrageous behavior, touching his mistress in front of me. "To gloat over your handiwork, right?"

Arlene shakes her head. "I can produce a dozen witnesses to prove I was at my mother's apartment all night, and I phoned Jack from there. My mother, the doorman, the maid—"

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"Then it was you, Jack." I turn to him. "You—"

"No." And from his tone of voice, I feel my heart turn over sickeningly. "It was you."

"Me?"

"You got up and went downstairs when I got off the phone. You must have listened to the message, then you lit the flame. You—" and he can't go on. Jack is sobbing.

Sobbing over the house.

Not over us, not over our marriage.

"Yes!" My scream is a burst of flame through shattered glass. "Are you satisfied now? I heard you on the phone, I've had my suspicions for a long time now—all those nights working late on the plans for the house, you kept saying—while you were working on your kisses with Arlene. So I set the machine, and it picked up after the first ring. I listened to it, and yes, I knew we had nothing left. The house was supposed to celebrate our love." And now it's my turn to cry. "And you used it to spend time with *her.*"

"It was house, house, house," Arlene says. "You were never in love with Jack, you were in love with mauve and grey."

Jack is staring at me, his face is crumbling like the ash flakes in the mound next to us. "You—you *burned down our house.*"

"And you burned down our lives."

I know, then, as Jack reaches a mute hand to Arlene, as she enfolds him in her arms, as he cries into her shoulder, as she strokes his hair and whispers into his ear, I know that I have lost him.

And shapes, pictures, swirl before my eyes, limned by fire. Jack, reaching out toward me as I sat poring over wallpaper catalogues, and I hissed, "Not now, we have to make some decisions here." Jack, asking to go to a movie, and my shaking my head no, we had work to do on the house. And earlier still: Jack beside me in the car the night he proposed, as I sat and wondered, what was I doing with this man? And pushed aside the thought. He was handsome, he was accomplished, he would make the perfect husband, the rest would follow. Wouldn't it?

It didn't.

So I had retreated deep into myself, a tiny ball curled within a mauve and grey giftwrap. And Jack—he had retreated into Arlene.

"Yes." And my voice is quiet now. "Yes. I did it."

I did it. I did it.

Someone must have called the police, because I hear the wail of the sirens. They're coming to take me away. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

CLARITY

by Bryn Bonner

Her faded blue eyes swam unfocused behind the magnifying lenses of her oversized glasses. The lack of fixity was familiar, but unsettling. The overall effect was that of a punch-drunk owl. As our gazes locked, I felt a deep sense of regret. I had misjudged the woman. Oh, how badly I had misjudged her! And now it was too late.

"I know that camomile is your favorite, so I brewed a cup special—just for you," she was saying, her voice sounding indistinct and dreamy. "I wanted to make things easy for you." The words evaporated in a garble of disjointed syllables as her voice drifted.

Bryn Bonner is a pseudonym for a former teacher and journalist from Cary, North Carolina. Her debut for *EQMM* is her first fiction publication in a national magazine. Although Ms. Bonner is the mother of three teenagers, she manages to find time to write regularly. In addition to turning out sharply observant tales such as the following, she is currently at work on her first novel. ¶

Mother McCain's annual visits had settled into a familiar pattern: anticipation, followed by irritation, exasperation, and, finally, remorse. I had determined early in my seven-year marriage that I would strenuously avoid stereotyping my mother-in-law. I vowed that I would treat her with kind regard and affection. After seven

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years, I could say that I still felt a keen gratitude to her for having produced my husband. But to say that I regarded her as good company was putting too fine a point on it.

I looked forward to her visits—in theory. I prepared for them elaborately. I stocked her favorite foods, soaps, and shampoos. I purchased new towels. I cleaned like a woman possessed. I cleared my calendar to devote time to entertaining her. I prepared myself mentally as well. I still wanted to be a good daughter-in-law. My friends all assured me that I was lucky to have Mother McCain instead of their interfering, overbearing bêtes noires. Mother McCain was saintly in comparison, they insisted. And I suppose from an outsider's point of view she must have appeared to be the picture of sweet fragility, slightly doddering and amusingly eccentric. Mother McCain didn't interfere—overtly. She was not openly critical. Nor did she demand much—outright. Of course, she didn't need to. Those around her stayed on a constant state of alert, trying to interpret her needs from the steady stream of hints and whining observations she emitted, like insistent blips on a radar screen.

By day three of each visit, the irritation always set in. Her unspoken demands, her martyr's sighs, and the shift in Dan's behavior from reasonable adult to recalcitrant child formed an endless loop of irritants. It rubbed my nerves raw—a belt sander on my psyche.

The situation would escalate to a level that threatened to implode our family into a black hole of wrangling and despair. I held on by a slender thread and marked my personal calendar with a big yellow sunshine to denote her departure date. I made it a point to stare at this promising talisman each morning. On that day, I would drive her to the airport, achieving, if not exceeding, the speed limit.

The minute the plane was airborne, the feeling of shame always overtook me. I would tell myself I was an ungrateful, overly sensitive, brittle woman, even as I felt the exuberance rising in my chest.

To be fair, much of the problem was created by our mutual unrealistic expectations of one another. I had my own ideas about what a grandmother should be and they far exceeded Mother McCain's capacity for the role. She conducted her initial interview with each of the children shortly after her arrival, asking standardized questions—she actually had them written in a little notebook—about school, interests, and activities. She listened distractedly to the answers, those liquid eyes floating to her diamond-encrusted wristwatch, and then bobbling along to gaze out the window. Her duties

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thus fulfilled, she essentially ignored the children for the rest of the visit, except when their noise or behavior annoyed her.

Her expectations of me, particularly in regard to my role as housewife, not only exceeded my capacity, they would have been daunting to June Cleaver.

This trip had begun badly, then rapidly declined. The first irksome tweak occurred even before her arrival.

"Carla, dear," her reedy voice had come vibrating through the telephone lines, "did I send you a copy of my itinerary or, that is, do you have one from the travel agent or, well, I mean to say, do you have my flight number and ETA so that you'll be on time to pick me up?"

I shook my head to clear the fuzz of sleep from my brain and get the synapses firing. I squinted, bringing the luminous numbers on the bedside clock into some kind of focus. *Five-thirty in the morning!* "Mother McCain? Is everything all right?" I stammered. "Itinerary? Flight? For your visit?" I plopped my head back on the pillow and squeezed the bridge of my nose with a finger and thumb, trying to compress a flair of temper, as the decidedly non-emergency nature of the call was becoming apparent.

"No, Mother McCain, I didn't get it yet," I sighed, my voice thick with sleep, "but I assumed it would arrive closer to your visit, or that I could call you a couple of days beforehand to find out the particulars." *Much later!* She wasn't due for another week and a half. Was it really necessary for her to call at five-thirty to give me this information *NOW*, for heaven's sake?

"Well, Carla, it's *TODAY!"* she said, artfully combining a shout and a whine. "You didn't get a copy? Oh dear, does this mean you can't pick me up? Heavenly Days! I thought you were prepared for my visit, but I see that I was completely wrong. Am I presenting you with a problem you can't handle?"

By now I was wide awake and sitting bolt upright, the wave in our waterbed threatening a small tsunami as my feet and legs thrust over the side searching for level, reassuring floor. "Today?" It came out as a croak and I cleared my throat and tried again. "I expected you next Thursday, the tenth. You mean you're coming in *TODAY*? Where are you right now?"

"The tenth. Well, no. I changed my reservations when I found out I'd miss my bridge tournament at the club. Didn't I tell you all this? I thought I did. I guess I must've forgotten—Oops!" she said and gave a little snort of a laugh.

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"Oh well, that's water under the bridge," she continued, as I tried to gather my wits. "The point is, I'm at home in Racine right now, and I'll be leaving at two-seventeen P.M., just after I get my hair done. You remember Monica, lovely girl, she still does my hair, though I don't like her as much as I did that little Ginny, but she's out having her second, no, I think it's her third baby." I clenched the receiver and tried to find a place to wedge into the running monologue, but found none. "Connie is taking me to the airport. She had to take time off, but I, for one, don't see that as a problem."

Dan roused. A jab from my index finger to his rib cage helped him along. He turned over and squinted at me, glanced at the clock and back at me, focusing on the telephone at my ear.

"I'll be arriving at seven twenty-six P.M.," she went on, "will you be there, or shall I get Connie to make other arrangements for me? A taxi or limo or something? I suppose I could do that, although I feel uneasy with some of those drivers. I always think about them taking my things and throwing my body behind a dumpster somewhere. But I don't want to be a bother. If you've failed to make plans to pick me up, I'll force myself to be brave and get there somehow."

Dan struggled to raise his eyebrows inquiringly. He muttered a "Whatzup?" as he ran his hand through his untamed bed-head.

"No, no, of course, Mother McCain," I said, coaching myself to breathe slowly and keep my voice modulated, "either Dan or I will be there to greet you when you arrive. Don't worry."

"Don't have Dan come, Carla, you know he works so hard. You should let him have some time to relax at the end of his day. You can come out to get me. I'm on Flight 386. And bring the children."

Of course, I thought. *No problem, I do NOT work hard and can certainly turn my world upside down and come a-runnin'!* But at least I was happy that she was asking to see the children. Until she added, "They can pull my bags, I've got the kind on little wheels now, and I won't have to tip the skycap."

I placed the handset back in its cradle and stared at it with contempt. The instrument of my undoing. *Kill the messenger.* I resisted the impulse to smash it to the floor and turned instead to a living target.

Dan held his hands up in front of him and bowed his head in a gesture of surrender. "Don't tell me, let me guess. I got some of it from your side of the conversation, and some from her voice over the line three feet away. She gave us the wrong date for her visit and

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neglected to let us know about her change in plans. She's coming in today, right?"

"Yes!" It sounded shriller than I intended, but nowhere near reflected how I felt. "What are we going to DO?"

"We'll just have to make the best of it," Dan said, shaking his head as he stood up and rubbed his face with both hands. "You know how it goes with her. There's not a whole lot you can do about it." He shrugged and turned both palms upward in a What're-ya'-gonna-do gesture.

"Dan," I said, staring hard at the paisley pattern on our comforter to keep myself focused, "I can't just go with the flow on this one. This is a real problem." My mind was reeling. I ran through my litany of things to panic about. "The guest room's a mess. I haven't been shopping for her stuff yet. I have two projects due over the course of the next six days. We have plans with the Randalls for the weekend. Tickets for the play we've spent a month's entertainment budget on, remember? The children have play dates set up. You know how the noise bothers her. Oh God, and Dude, we haven't made arrangements to board Dude, and you know how she *hates* the poor dog!" The paisley was now spinning like a lopsided kaleidoscope. What a mess. I slumped onto the bed with a slosh and fell back, staring at the ceiling. It had cobwebs in every corner.

When at last I had composed myself I looked up at Dan, searching for reassurance. "I guess this isn't the best time," he said timidly, "to remind you that I'll be in Kansas City for that conference for three days next week."

Things had gone not just downhill but subterranean from there. The facial tissue was not her usual brand, she feared it would give her a rash. The stir-fry, made with two scant tablespoons of olive oil, was *swimming* in fat, and she couldn't possibly eat it with her high cholesterol. The pressure in the shower head was too intense and the soap had a peculiar smell.

I had dreams. There were ten of her, each one whining about some aspect of the creature comforts found wanting in my household. The whining increased in pitch until my head fell off my shoulders and rolled rapidly down the hallway. All ten Mother McCains were small and oddly shaped, like little Russian nesting dolls I had seen once in a specialty toy store. They were arranged in a triangular pattern. I had on bowling shoes, I saw, as my head rotated. I could see a long expanse of highly polished oak planking behind

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me. I became aware of familiar bowling alley sounds, the thunder of bowling balls on hardwood, the crack of the pins, the drone of the reset machines. *Yeah. This was gonna be great. Impact was imminent!* The yammering pinheads grew louder as my head picked up speed. *Almost there!* I awoke in confusion and was temporarily distressed that I had come awake before what I was sure would have been a strike. My heart was pounding. What a weird dream, I remember thinking, unable to keep a slight smile from twitching at the corners of my mouth.

On day three, with the kids away at sleepovers, she offered to take us out to dinner, hinting that my cooking made this more a necessity than a social occasion. *Oh well,* I told myself, *dinner out is dinner out.* We braced ourselves for her customary but excruciating ritual of choosing an acceptable restaurant.

We narrowed it down to seven by perusing the newspaper, the telephone book, and the motor-club guide. Then we drove to three in succession for the on-site inspection. She questioned the hostess at each about the menu and how long we'd have to wait to be seated. She asked numerous questions about food preparation, noise levels, and lighting. I imagined the rumors that would be flying among the various staffs the next day. *Someone important might be coming in. Maybe it was the president, he was campaigning in nearby Oakmont. Or maybe the artist formerly known as Prince and his entourage; he was playing at the amphitheater.*

Cafe Romine finally passed muster and we were shown to our table by a young man wearing a starched white shirt, a black bow tie, and a solicitous smile. With a rehearsed flourish he pulled Mother McCain's chair from the table and gestured toward it grandly.

"Young man," she barked, pulling herself up to her full five foot two, "I don't know who you think you are, but I don't like that sort of thing. I can handle my own chair."

His freckles suddenly seemed incandescent and he stammered his unwarranted apologies as he withdrew to the opposite side of the table, putting something heavy and solid between them.

"Sorry," Dan murmured in the hapless boy's direction, then turned to me and winced. The deflated waiter bowed slightly, his face continuing to redden, and beat a hasty retreat.

"What was that all about?" Dan asked as we settled in, scraping our chairs across the ceramic floors. I studiously ignored the other diners, hoping no one had witnessed our opening gambit.

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"I sometimes think," Mother McCain was whispering, "that they might purposely make me fall and in the confusion steal my purse. It would be so easy for them to just pull the chair from beneath me when I go to sit down."

Dan hesitated, pondering this theory with mock seriousness. "I don't see that as very likely," Dan assured her, smiling indulgently. "But you know, Mother, that does remind me of some safety issues we've discussed before. Ones you don't seem to be taking to heart. If you are concerned about your safety, you need to think of more *basic* issues. Like carrying less cash; you need to get traveler's checks. Use a different pocketbook, one with a shoulder strap and a flap over the front of it. And why in the world would you wear so much jewelry, especially all those rings, when you travel? That's just advertising for trouble." Dan paused for a moment, frowning. "Where did all those come from, anyway? I don't remember you having that many diamonds."

"What do you mean we've talked about this before, I don't remember talking about any of this nonsense," Mother McCain replied petulantly. "And don't be silly. No one is going to take these. They are family heirlooms." She shook her head and swished her hand, dismissing the very possibility, as if their status as family heirlooms made them impervious to theft. She propped her elbow on the table and fingered the rings.

"Where did I get them? Well, let's see," she said, jutting out her knob of a chin and turning her hand in the light from the candle in the table's center. "This one belonged to your Grandmother McCain. She gave it to me shortly before she passed away, on her deathbed actually. She didn't have daughters, and I was the wife of her oldest son. She thought, I suppose, that I might pass it on to my daughter, but I guess I fooled her. I didn't have any girls either. Guess she never thought of that. She wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, my mother-in-law," she said, a lazy grin pleating wrinkles across her face.

Dan and I exchanged puzzled looks. "Okay," Dan replied, drawing out the word and giving me an uneasy sidelong glance. "I recognize your own engagement ring from Dad; what about the other two?"

Her recitation was interrupted by the freckle-faced waiter, who had brought reinforcements in the form of a ponytailed girl carrying a tray filled with a water pitcher and glasses. He took our order as quickly as possible, glancing around nervously and avoiding direct eye contact with Mother McCain as he answered her interrogation

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regarding the preparation of her selection. He and the girl exchanged relieved glances as they left for the kitchen.

When they had gone Mother McCain flattened her liver-spotted hand on the white linen tablecloth and continued her inventory. Glittering stones filled her ring finger to her mid-knuckle. The flesh protruded above the last and thickest of the bands. "This one," she said as she pointed to a thin band with an exceptionally large solitaire, "was your great-aunt Elizabeth's. She became engaged to a young man who was killed in the war. She never got over it. Never married. Mother sort of looked after her, you remember, when her health failed. I was her only niece." She delivered the last sentence in a singsong voice, punctuating each word with a stab of the tablecloth with her fire-engine-red nails. They curved around her fingers like pistachio shells. They made a hollow, clattering sound, even on the tablecloth.

She pointed to the next array of stones. "My father was deeply in love with my mother during their courting years." She smiled dreamily, recalling an oft-told family tale. "He always wanted only the best for her. He gave her this ring on the day he proposed at Cascade Gardens." This ring featured four large emerald-cut diamonds set across a white-gold band. "Even when her Alzheimer's got really bad, looking at this always helped her remember Daddy. She gave it to me. And then that was all."

"All what?" Dan asked, leaning toward her, frowning in concentration.

"Well, all the rings I got," she said as she used her diamond-encrusted hand to pick up her napkin and snap it open vigorously. "And, of course, the last female relative in my line."

My spine stiffened involuntarily at her offhand addition of this salient point. Dan's head tipped to one side, as if putting his body askew could align the tenor of the conversation.

"I know you didn't give Carla an engagement ring," Mother McCain continued. "I still can't understand that, really. I've always thought that if a man *truly* loved a woman, well, he would want the world to know it, to make it perfectly clear. And the ring has always been the symbol for that."

I chewed vigorously at the inside of my lip and tried to remember the breathing exercises from our Lamaze classes. Dan sputtered. "Mother, Carla and I had different priorities when we were married. We were both in graduate school. Money was scarce. It would have meant postponing our marriage for a piece of carbon, Mother. That's

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all it is, you know, a crystalline form of carbon! We had other priorities. We wanted to be together. Can you understand that?" He slapped his open palm on the table and I saw several heads snap around in our direction.

"Whatever you say, dear," Mother McCain replied breezily, her gaze skimming along the restaurant's elegant french doors which opened to a small outdoor bistro, seeming to lose interest in the subject.

"And," Dan persisted, not ready to let it drop, "now that we can afford it, I do want the world to know how much I *still* love Carla. I just got her an eternity ring for our anniversary. Show her, Carla."

I half expected him to stick out his tongue at her and say, "So there!" but he turned to me and urged me to action, his index finger tracing circles in the air as if to say, "Come on, come on!"

I hesitantly extended my left hand. The ring meant a lot to me. I had been thrilled when Dan had surprised me with it at a carefully orchestrated dinner last month. I didn't wear it around the house. It needed to be sized, and I was afraid I'd lose it doing housework, so Mother McCain hadn't seen it. Showing it to her under these circumstances sullied it. I resented it. But I didn't have long to dwell on it.

Her clawlike hand snatched my fingers in a pincer grasp. She thrust her face close to the ring and said, with grudging admiration, "That is quite a nice piece of work."

Dan smiled triumphantly. I turned to face him, my emotions clearly mapped on my face. His smile withered and he shifted in his chair. "Yes, well," he said, "Carla deserves it, and more." He rolled his eyes at me and gave me a sheepish smile.

Mother McCain pursed her lips, still maintaining her grip on my hand. With her other hand she retrieved her purse from the floor and placed it on her lap, opening the latch with one fluid movement and extracting a small object.

"What in the world . . ." Dan began.

"Don't worry, dear. It's only a jeweler's loupe. I just want to get a little closer look at the stones," she said, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. She leaned over and pressed the eyepiece to my hand. "Yes, yes, quite nice at that."

"Now you two," she said somberly, as she gazed up over the candlelight and her eyes began their indolent drift, "I want to teach you something very important, one of life's most important lessons,

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really. If you never listen to another word I say, you must listen to this."

We waited, like characters caught in some architectural frieze. Mother McCain was not given to sentimentality or to sharing her philosophy of life. We waited for her words of wisdom.

"There are four criteria," she said, "for judging diamonds: carat, color, cut, and charity."

I tried to pull my hand away as Dan and I looked at one another incredulously. As I struggled to free my hand, Dan fumbled for an appropriate response. Finding none, he said, "Uh, you mean 'clarity,' don't you?"

"Well," Mother McCain cackled, letting go of my hand and sitting upright, "in my case, it's more like charity, don't you think?" She pressed the jeweler's loupe against her glasses, enlarging one eye to even more bizarre effect. "They were all given to me, after all." She clamped her hand over her mouth as she issued a barking little laugh. "That's my little joke, you know. Of course, it's clarity. Clarity is very, very important. *In the end,"* she said, drawing out each word and dropping her voice conspiratorially, "the most important thing of all . . . clarity, clarity, clarity."

Dan and I sat dumbfounded.

"You know," she continued, leaning closer and bobbing her milky eyes from one side of the restaurant to the other as if searching for spies, "I hate to change the subject, but of course I'm going to. People always say that when they change the subject. I don't know why. But, anyway, do you know Jim and Connie want my house? They want it desperately. They're trying to get rid of me to get it."

I heard the theme from *The Twilight Zone* playing in my head and pressed my lips together hard to contain the guffaw that threatened to escape. I turned to Dan. He failed to see the humor in this absurd non sequitur. *"That* is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Jim and Connie do everything for you. They have a house of their own. And even if they did want your house, which they *don't,* they certainly would never do anything to you to get it."

Picking up her silverware and holding it close to her bifocals for inspection, Mother McCain appeared completely unruffled by the outrage in Dan's voice. "Well," she said patiently, "I guess it would be hard for you to believe. You're not there, so you don't really know how it is. They need a bigger house with all those kids, and he can't afford anything bigger. I know what I know. And I know they're

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plotting against me. It's not Jim, really, it's that wife of his who's put this idea in his head. But don't you worry about it. I'm onto them and I can take care of myself. And you know what else?" she asked, turning her head so sharply that her jowls shook, then literally lifting from her chair to lean her body over the table.

Dan shook his head, more exasperated now than angry. "What?" he asked warily.

"I don't think," she said, glancing from side to side, "that they are going to bring us any crackers or *anything* while we're waiting for our dinner." She gave a quick nod of her head, as if to say that she'd known it all along. You can't, in the end, trust anyone.

"She is stark-raving loony-tunes," Dan muttered that night as he paced our bedroom floor, threatening to wear a trench in the hardwood. "I need to talk to Jim about this. She has completely lost it."

"Take it easy, Dan," I urged. "I'll admit she's acting stranger than usual, but she's seemed all right the rest of the visit. I mean, she's been herself, which can be a little apart from the mainstream, but normal for her. She prattles on a lot and tends to change subjects mid-conversation, but she's always done that."

"You really think this is normal, even for her?" he asked doubtfully.

"I don't know, Dan," I admitted. "This paranoia thing is new. But you'll have a chance to talk it over with your brother at the end of next week. I haven't had a chance to tell you about this. She's called Jim and Connie and asked—well, more like instructed—them to drive down to get her at the end of her visit. Apparently, the airline service on the way down was not satisfactory and she doesn't intend to fly home."

"Oh no," Dan growled. "Jim doesn't need to be taking time off right now for this, it's his busiest season. And Connie's got her hands full trying to get her business off the ground. Why didn't you tell me? I could drive her home and save them the trip."

"I didn't make these arrangements," I answered tersely. "I didn't know she was going to call them, and I certainly couldn't have changed her mind about it if I had!"

"You're right. I know, I know. I'm sorry. God, that woman!" He threw his hands up in an appeal for deliverance.

Dan departed the next day for his conference, pledging to make it up to me in whatever way he could. He'd need eternity. I steeled myself.

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I doubled my morning walk and signed up for extra yoga classes. I worked late into the night, the only time I could work uninterrupted, on the projects I had contracted with a medical software company.

Mother McCain spewed her veiled complaints like water from an open fire hydrant. There was a spider in her bathroom. She was sure it was a brown recluse. The fish-tank motor troubled her sleep. The thermostat was set too low. The children didn't appreciate the value of money. They left lights on in their rooms. Didn't they know how costly electricity was? She felt uneasy when she sat on the patio to watch the birds because the neighbors were odd-looking. She was sure that Clifton, our next-door neighbor, was looking at her with malicious intent. Clifton was a retired accountant whose most aggressive act was muttering under his breath when the paperboy hit a puddle with his *Morning Herald.*

I was proud when Dan returned to find me lucid and functioning. He seemed reassured by my calm facade. *Silly man.* I looked forward to Jim and Connie's arrival. Mother McCain had insisted, over Dan's stringent argument, that they must come to chauffeur her home. Jim was nonplussed. They would come a couple of days early to visit. Connie's mother was there helping out with the kids and they could use a couple of days away, he said.

Jim and Connie lived only five minutes from Mother McCain's door. How had they endured nine years of this, I wondered.

They gave me a practical demonstration on their first night in. We grilled out on the deck and sat down about twilight to salmon steaks, salad, and baked potatoes. I observed as Mother McCain hit her stride about two minutes after we sat down to eat. An insinuated directive came forth about every two minutes, like labor pains. She fretted over the fat content in her salad dressing, she wondered aloud whether she might not need a sweater in the chilly night air. At seventy-eight degrees, I didn't think so! She allowed as how the lemonade was too tart for her tender palate. Through it all, Jim and Connie steadfastly ignored her. As Dan and I fetched the sweater, sought alternate salad dressings, went for iced tea—with two cubes of ice only—and generally performed like jack-in-the-boxes throughout the meal, Jim and Connie ate heartily and carried on a free-flowing conversation with Dan or me, whichever was left at the table at any given moment. They never once addressed Mother McCain directly. In fact, the only direct communication I could remember was a brief greeting upon their arrival and a bit of

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logistical information about the return trip. Then a virtual shutout. By the end of the evening, more than the night air must have seemed chilly to Mother McCain.

Over a sudsy sink filled with wineglasses and salad bowls I sent out a tiny verbal probe to Connie. "So, has Mother McCain been getting by okay lately? Anything unusual going on?" I asked tentatively. Connie sighed and slung the dish towel over her shoulder. Her clear gray eyes narrowed and then darted out through the window to the deck where Mother McCain sat ramrod-stiff in the patio chair, watching her sons clean the grill.

Connie raked her hand through her coppery hair and turned her comfortably padded body to lean against the kitchen island. "Okay, what has she been pulling?" she asked, her voice harsh. "Let me guess. The golf pro at the club is going to kill her and dump her in the water hazard. No, the bag boy at the grocery store intends to beat her senseless and steal her no-fat cookie bars. Oh, I know. Jim and I are going to have her committed to a psychiatric hospital so we can have her house! That's my personal favorite!"

The vitriolic tone in Connie's voice took me aback. Connie had always struck me as a voice of calm reason, a person of measured and thoughtful responses. I stared at her slack-jawed for a moment and her face flushed as she grabbed the towel from her shoulder and stepped back to the sink. "I'm sorry," she said as she picked up a glass from the drainer and circled the goblet with the drying cloth. "I'm just feeling a lot of stress right now. I'm working long hours trying to get the gift shop running smoothly. It's been difficult. And Mother McCain is—well, Mother McCain." She shifted her gaze to the deck and narrowed her eyes as she surveyed the subject of our discussion.

"Hey," I said, "you don't need to apologize. She certainly can be taxing at times."

Connie looked at me squarely for a long moment. She sighed and said, "You don't know the half of it. Sometimes," she said, "sometimes . . ." Her eyes narrowed again as she glared out the window. I sensed that she wanted to tell me something more, but she shook her head and turned to pick up another glass.

Mother McCain's departure was only one day away and I was entering the remorse stage early. Jim and Connie had to contend with so much and here I was buckling after only a week and three days. Mother McCain was a nervous, befuddled woman. She needed my

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help and support. I resolved anew to close out our visit on a kind and generous note.

Jim and Connie left early that morning to visit a local women's craft cooperative and the nearby factory outlets in search of inventory for Connie's gift shop. Dan decided to put in some time at the office since they would be gone for most of the day. School buses ran on time and as Dan gathered up his briefcase and laptop, and juggled his commuter mug of coffee, I vowed to take full advantage of my time alone with Mother McCain.

"Good morning, Mother McCain," I greeted her as she shuffled into the kitchen a half-hour later. She was clad in her quilted satin bathrobe and blue bedroom slippers. The slippers were trimmed with downy feather boas across the top and were the style my mother used to call mules. They reminded me of old Lana Turner movies. Her hair stood erect all over her head. *Albert Einstein meets Edith Bunker,* I thought wryly. "Could I fix you some breakfast?" I asked, exuding as much morning cheer as a night owl like me can muster.

"Oh, I don't know, Carla," she said wearily. "I don't have much of an appetite. I hardly slept a wink last night. There was so much noise. I'm quite a light sleeper, you know. Your children were playing the hi-fi very loud—until all hours."

I mentally reviewed the previous evening. The children had been in bed asleep by nine, as they always were on school nights. Jim and Dan had commandeered the wing chairs in our seldom-used living room while Connie and I sat curled up on the sofa. We had talked until well past midnight about our families and jobs—anything *but* Mother McCain—with Jackson Browne playing *softly* on the stereo. "I'm afraid that was the four of us, Mother McCain," I said. "We certainly didn't mean to disturb you. I never realized the sound carried all the way to that end of the house." *I could do this. All I needed was patience—bushels and bushels of patience.*

"Well, it does," Mother McCain stated flatly. "I guess I really should eat something. There's no need for me to be exhausted *and* malnourished. A poached egg, white-bread toast, just golden brown this time. Last time it was too dark. I can't eat it like that. And orange juice, if you've got fresh squeezed; if not, forget it, that frozen concentrate is dreadful. It makes me gag."

"Coming right up," I said brightly. I tried to remember where on earth the little egg poacher thing was. "I have about two hours' worth of work to do this morning, but I thought after that we might

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visit for a while. We really haven't had much of a chance to talk while you've been here," I said, setting a plate and silverware in front of her at the breakfast bar. The modest glint of the stones from my ring was overpowered as she rearranged the place setting to her liking. The mother lode on her finger played a little laser show in the morning sun, fracturing the light into rainbows of color.

"Well, you've known where to find me," she sniffed. "I haven't been the one with the busy, busy schedule . . . dear," she added belatedly and gave me a little pickled smile.

She wasn't going to make this easy. *Lonely, befuddled, sick woman,* I reminded myself. I fished the egg poacher from the jumble at the back of the drawer and set it in the skillet I had half filled with water.

"But it's okay, I don't want to be a bother," she continued, with a woebegone sag of her shoulders.

Yeah, right!

She brightened suddenly, sat upright and slapped both palms down on the countertop. "You're right," she said, "we should have some quality time. Isn't that what you yuppies call it? I'll do something for you this morning," she exclaimed. "Connie brought down some of my special tea. I get it at a little shop in old town. Jim usually picks it up for me. They have a delivery boy, but I don't like strangers coming to my house. I'll brew us a cup and we can chat. Just show me where you keep your teapot and some decent tea cups."

This was progress. I smiled my appreciation. "Sure, that would be nice. I'm afraid we're rather reliant on the microwave around here, but we do have a teapot downstairs in the storage cupboard. I'll get it and clean it up in a few minutes."

"You do have your moments, Carla." A sweet smile stretched across her doughy face. "At least I don't have to always be worried with you two like I am when Jim and Connie are around. I'm sure you, and Dan too, must feel a little embarrassed that you didn't believe me the other night at dinner when I told you about them. It must be clear to you now, from the way they treat me . . ." She lifted her head, pushing her glasses back up on the bridge of her nose with her pinky, wrinkling her nose to settle them into place. "But I'm wise to them and they know if they make a wrong move they'll get nothing for their trouble. You two needn't worry," she continued briskly. "I've already had Mr. Naborsky draw up a new will that I'll activate if they don't toe the line, and I've written every-

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thing down and put it in a safe place in case anything happens to me. I told them all this, so I feel I'm safe for now."

I released the pressure on the orange half I'd been pushing against the spindle of the juicer and stared wide-eyed at Mother McCain. "I—I don't quite know what to say," I finally managed to get out. *Except that you have completely lost it and the idea of a psychiatric hospital is suddenly looking like a grand idea,* I thought. "You've brought Mr. Naborsky into this?"

"Into this? He's my attorney. Has been for thirty years," she chuffed. "Of course he's been informed of what's going on. Somebody needs to know the whole story. The police say they can't do anything about it unless they actually do something."

"The POLICE," I said, my voice rising a full octave. "You've talked to the police about this theory?"

"Of course," Mother McCain replied coolly, motioning for me to get back to my juicing task. "They will need to know the particulars if anything happens to me. And as long as Jim and Connie know they're wise to them, it'll act as a . . . what do they call it? . . . a deterrent!"

I thought back to Connie's reaction to my questions about Mother McCain. No wonder she was testy. To have this woman going around maligning them in the community must have been galling, to say the very least.

I set the glass of juice in front of her. She took the glass in her gnarly hand and held it up to the light, examining it for—I couldn't begin to guess what. This is serious, I thought. I need to call Dan.

"It's come to a boil," she said, staring at me knowingly through those gelatinous blue orbs as she raised the glass of juice to her lips.

"What exactly do you mean by 'come to a boil'?" I asked hesitantly, mesmerized by both the eyes and the galaxy of stones winking at me.

"Come to a boil!" she said indignantly. "The water for my egg, it's come to a boil. I'd like to eat my breakfast now so I can try to get some rest!"

When she had finished her breakfast and returned to her room to nap I picked up the phone and punched in three numbers, then hesitated. What exactly would I say when Dan came on the line? *Your mother has gone completely crackers and has told the police that your brother is trying to kill her, and, by the way, what time will*

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you be home for dinner? Better to deal with this face-to-face. We would have to sit down with Jim and Connie tonight and face this thing head-on.

I tried to concentrate on getting my work done, but episodes from the past few days kept intruding. Poor Connie and Jim. How could Mother McCain be so lucid one minute, and so peculiarly paranoid the next? I didn't want to think about what would happen to her. I wondered if anyone would be able to help, or if this was an irreversible decline. I felt genuine compassion. The poor woman was ill. I had been so insensitive, so intolerant of her frailties.

An hour and a half later Mother McCain stuck her head around the doorframe of my study. "Are you about ready to take a break?" The Einstein do was gone, her hair carefully coiffed and sprayed into a configuration that closely resembled a World War I infantry helmet. She was dressed in a brilliantly colored wind suit of turquoise and magenta. The jacket was covered with squares of varying hues and intensities. *Mondrian is probably twirling in his grave,* I thought.

"Sure, that sounds good, just give me a few minutes to shut everything down."

"Here's the special tea I told you about. Just wait till you taste it," she was saying as I came into the kitchen. "You'll never be satisfied with plain old pedestrian tea from the neighborhood Shop 'n' Save again. I already have the water on to boil. I used the spring water, your tap water here is not fit to brew tea. Get some more, I used it up."

"That's fine," I replied, a wistful tone creeping into my voice. She was really making an effort; I was touched. I prepared the tea tray and turned to her with what I hoped was a winning smile. "Let's go sit out on the deck."

I settled, with my teacup and my readjusted attitude, into the green patio chair on the shady end of the deck. Mother McCain, looking deceptively normal, perched in a chair opposite me so that she could have a better view of the bird feeder.

An awkward silence ensued. I searched my mind for a safe subject for conversation. "You're right, this tea is absolutely wonderful. Where did you say you get it?"

"At a little shop in old town, The China Pearl. I used to go there all the time, but it's a little difficult for me to get down there now

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and park on those congested streets. My driving skills are not what they used to be."

I shuddered inwardly at the thought of her, paranoid delusions in full flower, behind the wheel of a moving vehicle.

"So now Jim or Connie usually pick things up for me. They get fresh tea for me twice a week. It's close to Connie's gift shop." She hissed the last words, a pound of contempt packed into two syllables. "I don't see why in the world she thought she had to open that thing. I haven't ever told Dan this, but they tricked me into lending them the money for that little venture. They told me they *needed financing*. I thought they meant that they were on the brink of bankruptcy or something. I thought I was rescuing them from ruin. It was never clear to me they'd use it to open a gift shop."

Things suddenly seemed very clear to me. Jim and Connie were in debt to Mother McCain. They were at her beck and call for services rendered—or in this case, loans extended. On top of everything else she subjected them to, now they were financially beholden to her.

"Well, if the shop does well," I suggested, "it would certainly help them out. It's difficult to raise a family in this day and age, almost impossible on one income. I've been lucky to find work I can do at home. We could never make it on Dan's salary alone. Connie is working very hard, and she is a talented woman. I'm sure it will be a success. It was nice that you were in a position to help them out."

"I told you, they tricked me into it. I've written all that down in my report, too."

Her words seemed to be slightly slurred, and I turned to face her full on. Beads of sweat—or something—were glistening on her forehead. "Are you okay, Mother McCain?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, why do you ask?" But the warble was still there, producing a strange after-echo with each word. "This tea is very relaxing, isn't it? Connie said Mr. Palmdale—he's the owner of the little emporium where I get the tea—sent this special for me. It has some Chinese herbs that are very rare in it. Connie said he insisted that I try it and keep it as my personal stock since it's so hard to get. Yours is camomile." Her voice seemed to be oscillating, far away one moment and uncomfortably loud the next. I felt a twinge of uncertainty.

Connie. The tea. Could it be? *Of course not,* I told myself firmly. *You are really letting your imagination get the best of you here.* Was paranoia contagious?

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But still, something felt wrong. "Have you ever felt strange after you drink the tea? Ever have any strange sensations?" I studied her more closely. She seemed to be listing to one side.

"Sometimes. Why all this interest, Carla? Are you confused? Not thinking clearly? Everybody thinks *I'm* the one who can't think clearly! Ask anybody, they'll tell you that about me. She just can't think clearly, they'll say." She now appeared to be weaving back and forth in her chair.

I stared at the two empty cups, suddenly alarmed. I ricocheted between the conflicting planes of reality arising on either side of me. Could it possibly be that Mother McCain had been right all along? Were Jim and Connie trying to harm her? Jim or Connie always picked up the tea. But that was unthinkable. This was Jim and Connie I was thinking about. *Get a grip,* I admonished myself!

I turned to Mother McCain. Her mouth was moving, but words didn't seem to be coming out. She was even more off kilter than before. I started to get up and go to her, but I couldn't seem to move. I was frozen in the chair. Something odd focused my attention. Her whole body looked like it was tilted at an acute angle, but the chair was perfectly aligned with her body. She wasn't tilting, I was. My legs and arms felt leaden. It was an effort to hold my head up.

"Feeling a little odd yourself, are you, Carla?" she asked softly. The voice sounded as if it were coming at me from under water. "I really want to thank you. I never thought I'd get another chance to do this again." Her liquid eyes floated above a self-satisfied smile. "I was resigned, you know. But you've given me another chance—one last chance to use my gifts."

What was she saying? This wasn't making any sense. Everything looked surreal. I felt something hard on my back and realized that I was lying on the deck facing into the trees. They appeared alive, a threatening miasma of branches slithering and winding around one another. I blinked hard and tried to come to a sitting position, but I couldn't. I rolled my head from side to side, trying to center my thinking and comprehend what was happening.

"I know that camomile is your favorite, so I brewed a cup special—just for you. I wanted to make things easy for you." Mother McCain was on her knees, leaning over me, her eyes like blue buoys caught in a boat's wake, bobbing up and down in rhythm. She spoke soothingly. "It's so much easier this way, Carla," she was saying from someplace far away. "That's always been clear to me. The others found that to be true, too. I'm sure of it. They all went peacefully. I

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did this for them because I loved them, and I've come to love you, too. I'm making you a gift of the one thing everyone searches for through all their lives—clarity. For everything to be perfectly understandable. When you cross over you'll have it." She held up her hand and wiggled her fingers, the reflections from the stones in her rings causing a burst of flickering light in my blurred vision. "That's why I wear these all so proudly. They are emblems—a sort of testament to the gift I have bestowed on them: my mother-in-law, peculiar old Aunt Elizabeth, and especially my dear mother. I tried my best to make things easier for you, just as I did for each of them. Now, you remember what I told you? I told you it was important, the most important thing of all. *Clarity*. Do you have *clarity* now, Carla?"

I felt my ring being tugged roughly from my finger. I had misjudged her. Oh, how I had misjudged her . . .●

Death Threat

by Kandis Elliot

Death darken not my doorway
Come not in, Despair
Turn Aside O Shadow
That goes a-wander'n there
Seek not this soul O Darkness
Pass you This One by
Death be not a-reachin'
Already dead am I
Pain treads these darkened hallways
Here Anger makes her bed
Here Screams resound unspoken
With tears that fall unshed
Fear lives within this dwelling
Here demons tend to chores
Darken not my doorway, Death
And I'll not darken yours.

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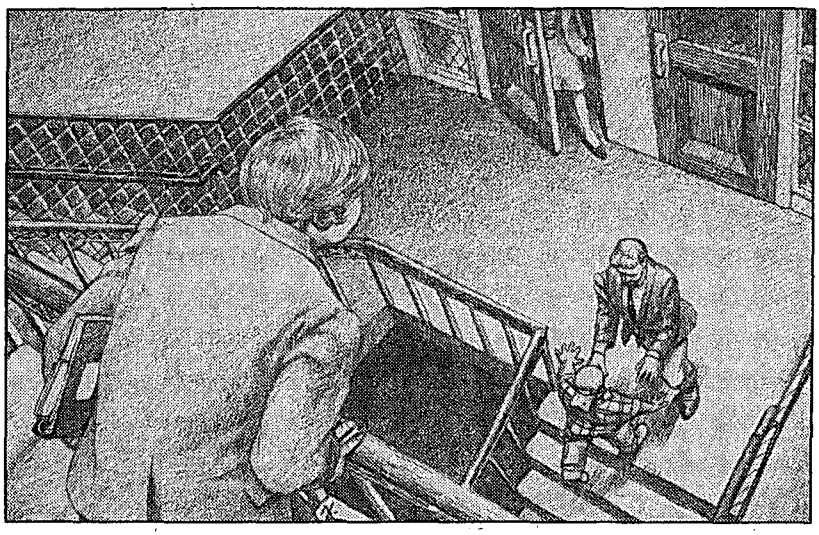

Art by Jason Eckhardt

A Small But Perfect Crime

by Madeleine Costigan

The idea had lain dormant in Karl's brain for weeks, waiting for the moment when necessity would stir it into action. Sort of a vaccination for terminal failure, was how he put it to himself. First, it had been merely a hypothetical possibility, unrelated to him personally. Later, something he could use if he became desperate, like knowing where the fire escape was. But today, at the window of the science lab, he admitted to himself that the thing had become just another distasteful mechanism for survival.

He had only to step into the principal's office this afternoon when the school was quiet, open the unlocked closet that contained the City Tests, and take copies of the science questions.

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Once he knew the questions, preparing his students would be a piece of cake. The school had been broken into so many times recently that the school board had balked at replacing damaged locks. Then, with their characteristic unassailable logic, they had directed that all closets and classroom doors be left unlocked.

Karl watched as Ira Carpenter, head of the math department, and Harold Burgoyne, principal of Howell Middle School, dashed across Water Street, back to school. Even through the rain-spattered glass he couldn't miss the complaisant set of Burgoyne's lips. That kindly smile was about to rise again, dispensing peace and goodwill everywhere. Karl had expected Carpenter to require a little more persuading. Something about the stooped bigness of his frame, the heavy-lidded eyes that looked as though they never slept, had given him the impression that Carpenter was the sort that liked to turn a thing around awhile until he found a way to justify it to himself. But Burgoyne exuded victory, and Karl conceded with a shrug that he had been mistaken about Carpenter. It was the shrug of a man accustomed to being mistaken.

He'd had his own talk with Burgoyne this morning. "Fraley is steamed over the vandalism," Burgoyne had begun, referring to Malcolm Fraley, the president of the school board. "It's ruining our image as a quality school."

Image was the stuff of life to Burgoyne. "Vandalism can't be tolerated," Karl said, waiting for Burgoyne to show his hand.

He did not have long to wait. "We know Charlie Patch is the ringleader, and quite frankly, I've never considered him Howell Middle School material."

Karl nodded, sensing another distasteful necessity coming up.

"You understand, don't you, that Charlie is the son of Doctor

A newcomer to *EQMM*, Madeleine Costigan has previously had short stories published in several national magazines, including *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, and *Good Housekeeping*. In addition to writing fiction, she frequently contributes to journals of the literary trade such as *The Writer*. Ms. Costigan currently lives in Philadelphia. †

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Edwin Patch, the cardiologist?"

The cardiologist was right. Edwin Patch had done bypass surgery on Harold Burgoyne. "Right," Karl said.

Burgoyne's watery blue eyes gave him a searching look. "We've got to finesse this one, Webb. It's a bit delicate."

"I should say so."

"Sending Charlie Patch to the youth center would be a grave mistake. And keeping him here would not serve the best interest of Howell Middle School. You know how dedicated I am to this school's best interest?"

"Indeed." To himself, Karl called the language he spoke to Burgoyne pedagese."

Burgoyne leaned forward, his hands taut on his knees. "Charlie Patch is a year older than his classmates. It would be helpful to all concerned if two of his teachers recommended that Charlie be skipped into Jefferson High, where it won't be quite so easy for him to dominate the other students. I'm counting on your recommendation, Webb, and Ira Carpenter's as well."

"Brilliant," Karl had said.

He was a short, stocky young man with lackluster hair and brooding eyes, known to his students as "Fatass." His back was to a map of stars as he stood looking out at the small brick-and-frame houses with their tidy yards. Each small grass plot contained at least one struggling azalea. Karl found it rather touching the way the parents of Howell Middle School children revered azaleas.

He didn't turn when he heard the light, quick step of Rita Miguel. She passed his doorway without stopping, then turned into the first room across the hall. Rita Miguel, the new social studies teacher, seemed to have her students hypnotized. Even the most insolent boys turned klutzy and vaguely dazzled in her gaze. The girls openly copied her—the satiny black bangs, the red pencil riding in her hair, even her affection for yellow and orange—a color combination she had pronounced dynamic. One of the older, less popular teachers had observed that yellow and orange might soon become the school colors.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Karl had asked Rita Miguel one morning in the faculty room.

"No, thanks." She'd breezed past him and then stood chatting with Ira Carpenter, a man twice her age.

Karl had tried again with a lunch invitation and been politely

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dismissed, making him feel like an eleven-year-old trying to suck up to the teacher. Since then, Rita Miguel had worn such a hurried, preoccupied look about her whenever they came in contact that he wondered what the others had told her about him. Did she know the kids called him Fatass?

His eyes traveled over his beleagured classroom. In a few minutes it would begin again. The bell rang and he could feel the tension throbbing through him. Fear coiled his stomach muscles into tight bands. It crept up through his chest, making his breathing ragged and shallow. He remembered the two years at med school and how he'd flunked out. Would today end in another humiliation, another failure? His students saw him as a buffoon. Why? He wanted only to help them.

Charlie Patch threw the door open and they trooped in, a turbulent crowd fresh from lunch, ready for entertainment. They slammed books on lab tables, and the volume rose as Karl shouted for order. He watched the vibration of the clapper on the mechanical device beside the transom, the bell to signal the beginning of class. Charlie Patch stood up and addressed his classmates in a mock military style. "Attention! Attention!"

The voices stopped almost immediately.

"Thanks, guys. I just love attention." He sat down.

A cheer went up, loud, manic, thinly soprano.

The soprano sound continued, whining like a mosquito in Karl's ear. The harsh fluorescent lights seemed to dim and grow bright again.

"Quiet, everybody. Quiet." But he couldn't hear himself. It was too late. His only chance was to get them from the beginning, before their own momentum fueled them. They followed Charlie Patch's lead without question. Karl's fingers crushed against a piece of chalk that was solid and hard, too small to split. Defeat, he thought, another defeat. Each one a little different but just as definitely defeat. De feet went over de fence before de tail. Now why did he think of that? The nonsense spun for a moment, singsonging in his brain, caught in the rhythm of the cheering class. He had to get it out of his head. He had to think. De feet went over de fence before de tail.

He was panicky, but it wasn't a frantic, physical panic that gripped him. Rather, it was a smothering paralysis that made him feel as though he had somehow receded from the class. He had no method of communication with them. Now they were chanting a

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telephone number to the tune of a TV commercial. *Six one four, thirty-six, ninety-four.* It took him a minute to recognize Rita Miguel's number. He had looked it up just to see if she was listed. And remembered it just in case. *Because Fatass has no class,* and then the last line was hummed—except for Charlie Patch, who was smugly mouthing words. *Six one four, thirty-six, ninety-four.*

Harold Burgoyne stood in the doorway a full thirty seconds before the class stopped dead.

"The City Tests are next week," he said. "No one in this room can afford to waste a moment of class time. Right, Branca? Syzmanski? Patch?"

"Right, Mr. Burgoyne."

"How do you expect to get good marks, get ahead, make something of yourself in this world unless you study and work hard?"

"Beats the shit out of me," Karl heard Charlie Patch mutter under his breath.

"Vince and me went to the planetarium last Saturday," Syzmanski said.

"Now that's more like it."

The planetarium assignment had been due a month ago but Karl said nothing. His words burned and spluttered in a throat clotted with sand.

Thirty pairs of eyes studied the glossy top of the lab tables. How much had Burgoyne heard? Had he recognized the telephone number?

"Anybody who wants to sing can go down to the music room after school and try out for the chorus. Don't let me hear any more singing in here. Got that?" And then turning up his volume, Burgoyne repeated, "Got that?"

The students nodded their heads like obedient dolls.

Burgoyne turned to Karl. "The kids in this school are the best in the city. They're great kids, every one of them." And then in a lower voice he rasped, "Take charge, Webb."

After Burgoyne left, the class remained chastened. The terror that had been clutching at Karl dissolved, and the faces before him were merely the upturned faces of children; as though the scene of a few minutes ago were only the result of confused reception.

He began to talk to them about astronomy. "Astronomy is a science in which amateurs make valuable contributions," he told

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them. "You don't have to be up on the top of some mountain looking through a telescope to come up with useful data."

They were listening, actually listening. Syzmanski leaned forward, his chin resting in his hand. Karl's voice was controlled; he was only slightly self-conscious. The quiet was so heady that he was distracted for a moment by a feeling of intense exhilaration. He had held them for at least ten minutes.

They were discussing the constellation Cassiopeia when the indecision, the prelude to chaos seized him again. Cassiopeia was W-shaped, easy to remember. He was about to send one of them to the board to draw it, when he recalled a bit of advice from Carpenter. "Keep them writing," he'd said, "and in their places. Don't give them opportunities to make trouble."

Perhaps he should tell them to take out their books and draw it. Yes, let them write a description of it too. But when they reached for books they usually tried to be clumsy. They became a unanimous conspiracy against him. He decided to draw it on the board himself, even though that meant turning his back momentarily. He drew the constellation and the chalk squeaked on an upward stroke. Charlie Patch's face contorted in protest, but that was all. There was no disorder. The bell rang, and they jumped up and ran out without waiting to be dismissed. But a small feeling of accomplishment had ignited inside Karl. And once ignited it glowed, a small wavering scrap of hope that must not be snuffed out. Once he got hold of the tests he could be sure of his job for another six months. By that time he would have no trouble controlling his classes.

He walked over to the doorway and looked out into the corridor. Burgoyne was talking to Charlie Patch at the end of the hallway. Burgoyne! It was Burgoyne who had controlled them. The realization knifed into him, twisting its deep, probing edge, shredding his newfound confidence. Across the hall, Rita Miguel was rearranging her bulletin board, surrounded by a little knot of eager students.

Already, Karl's next class was bumping noisily past him. "Quiet!" he ordered, his voice unnecessarily loud, directed by fear. "I don't want anybody to move."

"Is this a holdup?" someone in the back snickered.

They settled down after that, unwilling to risk their privileged, gifted status. From the beginning they had been too intensely competitive with each other to indulge in troublemaking.

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They were more subtle. At first, Karl had liked them, been almost grateful to them because they listened to him quietly and respectfully, he thought. But then he had begun finding the cartoons. He seldom found them in the same place, and he didn't find one every day. The first was how he had learned his nickname was Fatass. Ira Carpenter got away with "Carpy." Rita Miguel, they called "Mike." The cartoon especially affected him because it was a blow from an unexpected source. He tore it into very little pieces before he threw it into the wastebasket.

A few days later he found a rude drawing of himself vigorously addressing a roomful of empty chairs. "Fatass has no class," the caption read. After that he perceived a silent contempt in every pair of eyes.

His only weapon against the cartoons was indifference, but it was neither satisfying nor convincing. He developed a fear of Burgoyne discovering one. Or perhaps one of the maintenance people would, or already had, for all he knew. Every afternoon before he left he searched the room, not quite knowing whether he wanted to find one or not. Today he watched and hunted as his students looked through microscopes and wrote notes. The afternoon ended without one turning up.

After dismissal the school emptied quickly. He heard the busy, rattling sounds of the cleaners in the room next door; the clank of metal against a bucket, of a wooden broom handle against a wall. The cleaners were waiting for him to go and would get noisier, he knew. But he took his time. He wanted to be sure that Burgoyne was out of the building.

As he walked down the tiled corridor he checked classrooms. Rita Miguel was the only teacher he saw working late. On the steps he thought of running into the janitor or his assistant. Unlikely that Burgoyne would be in his office at this hour but it sometimes happened. But everything was quiet. Like the set of a play, he thought, and as he opened the door to Burgoyne's private office he could see the printed words, *Enter Villain.* Only a moment, a quick careful moment, and he would have his security. He slid the closet door open and scanned the neat stacks of printed pages. His fingers were sweaty; the pages stuck to them and he had to be slow. There were three sets of science tests and he took one of each, folded them in half, and slipped them into his notebook. He closed the closet door and counted that it took exactly six steps to cover the distance to the outer office. A small

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but perfect crime, he told himself, almost giggling. Perfect. But it was no time to be giddy; it wasn't over. He still had to go down a flight of stairs before he would be out of the building—before he would be safe.

And then he heard the voices coming up the stairwell, the big-brotherly tones of Harold Burgoyne merged with Charlie Patch's more belligerent sound.

Instinct drove Karl to travel soundlessly up a flight of stairs rather than come face-to-face with Harold Burgoyne.

"Charlie," Burgoyne said, "I'm going to do something for you, something you probably won't understand at your age."

"*You* do something for *me?* Do I look like a wuss?"

Karl leaned over the banister. Charlie Patch might have been talking to the kid beside him at a football game.

"Cool," Burgoyne said, "you look cool." He seemed to believe that appropriating a few words from the students' vocabulary enabled him to speak their language.

"Yeah, right."

"I'm transferring you from Howell to—"

"Transfer? I don't want some shitty transfer."

"Hold on, Patch."

"So you can send me to that place on the river with big stone walls and bars on the windows?"

Burgoyne took a step forward. "Be quiet and listen, Patch."

Karl watched the two of them from above. He watched as Charlie Patch took a step backward onto another foot of platform that wasn't there. For a moment he looked as though he would catch his balance on the top step, but he pitched backward as Burgoyne reached out to grab him and missed. Charlie Patch's head struck the railing and then he rolled down the few remaining steps.

The janitor came running. Rita Miguel was hurrying down the steps below Karl, and Ira Carpenter appeared at the door of the auditorium.

"He pushed me. Mr. Burgoyne pushed me," Charlie Patch accused.

Burgoyne's face was gray; his ashen skin sagged over his shirt collar as he stared at the boy, who twisted in his struggle to get up and then fell back again, looking as though someone had pinned his shoulders like a specimen in a biology slide. "Don't move, Patch," he ordered. To the janitor, he said, "Call the doctor."

"He pushed me, Mr. Webb."

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Burgoyne jumped in before Karl could reply. "Just lie still, Patch. You know Mr. Webb saw the accident. He saw you take a step backward and fall. I reached to catch you, but I never touched you. It happened too fast."

Everyone was waiting for Karl now, waiting to hear what he would say. He stood at the center of the little group savoring his moment of power.

"You were looking at me," Charlie Patch snarled at Burgoyne. "Old Fatass will say whatever you tell him to say. Everybody knows that."

But Karl was feeling the security of the science tests already in his pocket. He was like a kid who had finally saved the price of a new bike and then was given a bike for his birthday, better than the one he had saved for. There had been few moments of glory in Karl's life. None recently. It wasn't fair. Life had never been fair to him.

And so he stood there feeling Rita Miguel's soft dark eyes on him, Carpenter's measured ones, and Burgoyne's at first confident, then apprehensive.

He grasped the notebook a little tighter, wondering just when it was that a decision like this had become easy for him, no longer even a distasteful necessity, just easy. For a moment the giddiness he experienced when he'd finally gotten the tests came back. He thought it immensely funny that he'd never shoplifted or ripped off little kids on Halloween. That was where this sort of thing was supposed to begin; everybody knew that, just the way everybody knew that Karl Webb would say whatever Burgoyne told him to say. Was it fair that if he chose to save Burgoyne's ass people would think he was a coward?

And so he said what would surprise everyone else but didn't surprise him at all. "Mr. Burgoyne, I'm sorry. I'd like to help you. I wish I could say what happened but . . ." He left the sentence dangling, an ungrammatical fragment that could change his life. A sharp frown of pain crossed his face as he seemed to realize what the words were costing him.

Burgoyne's pale lips opened and closed without a sound, making Karl wonder if Burgoyne could somehow know that he had seen. Watching him, Karl experienced a disturbing twinge of conscience that settled itself into a faint murmuring as he saw the reluctant envy rise in Ira Carpenter's face. It disappeared altogether at the sight of open admiration welling in Rita Miguel's eyes. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

A Scream From the Sepulchre

by Peter Tremayne

It was the evening of All Saints' Day and Tressach, a warrior of the guard of the royal palace of Tara, home of Sechnassach, High King of Ireland, was unhappy. That evening he had drawn the most unpopular duty, which was to act as sentinel in that area of the palace complex where generations of High Kings were buried. Rows of carved granite memorials marked the mounds where many of the great monarchs were interred, often with their chariots, armour, and such grave goods as were needed to help them on their journey to the Otherworld.

Tressach felt uncomfortable that this duty fell to his lot on this night of all nights. The evening of All Saints, or All Hallows, as

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some now named it, was an ancient observance which many still called the Samhain Festival even though the five kingdoms had long accepted the new Faith of Christendom. Samhain, according to ancient tradition, was the one night of the year when the mystic realms of the Otherworld became visible to the living and when the souls of the dead could enter the living world to wreak vengeance on any who had wronged them in life. So strong was this belief among the people that even when the new faith entered the land it could not be suppressed. The Christians therefore incorporated the ancient festival by creating two separate celebrations. All Saints' Day was set aside as a day when the saints, known and unknown, were glorified, and the following day, All Souls, was given to the commemoration of the souls of the faithful dead.

The tales of Sister Fidelma (such as this one), set in 7th century Ireland, have, in one respect, a curiously contemporary feel. As *Publishers Weekly* said in its review of the first Fidelma novel, "in Tremayne's rendering (the period) is a golden age of enlightenment and of total equality for women." The series thus appeals to many besides history buffs. See *The Subtle Serpent* (St. Martin's/July '98). ✝

Tressach shivered slightly in the cold evening air as he approached the walled-off compound of graves, far away from the main palace buildings which made up the High King's capital. Autumn was departing with rapidity and the first signs of winter, the white fingers of a creeping evening frost, were permeating across the sacred hills of Royal Meath.

Tressach paused as he contemplated the path that he had to take between the darkened mounds with their granite stone portals. They called this "the avenue of the great kings," for here were entombed some of the most famous of ancient rulers. There was the imposing tomb of Ollamh Fodhla, the fortieth king, who gathered the laws of Ireland and established a *féis,* or convention, which sat at Tara every three years at the feast of Samhain. This was when judges, lawyers, and administrators gathered to discuss the laws and revised them. Indeed, Tressach knew that hosts of judges and lawyers had already descended on Tara, for the con-

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vention fell this very year. They would start their deliberations in the morning.

Here, also, was the imposing tomb of Macha Mong Ruadh, Macha of the Foxy Hair, the seventy-sixth monarch and the only woman to have ruled all Ireland. Beyond were the tombs of Conaire the Great, of Tuathal the Legitimate, of Art the Solitary, of Conn of the Hundred Battles, and of Fergus of the Black Teeth. Tressach could reel off the names of those who inhabited the graves like a litany. How were the mighty laid low.

Yet, why a warrior needed to waste his time patrolling this resting place of the dead was a mystery to Tressach. What need was there to guard this desolate place; and why this night, of all the dark autumnal nights? Tressach would have preferred to be somewhere else . . . anywhere else.

At least he had a lantern, but its light gave him little comfort. He began to walk with a quick pace as he passed down the darkened aisle between the tombs. The quicker he completed his task, so that—in good conscience—he could report to his commander that he had walked through the compound, the better. The thought that, at the end of his vigil, there would be a mug of *cuirm*, a strong mead, acted as an added incentive.

He turned a corner and conscience made him pause near a row of tombs for an inspection. He held his lantern before him. He owed it to his commander and his pride as a warrior to make a cursory check at each vantage point. His eyes fell on a newly dug grave and he found himself suppressing a shiver. He knew that Garbh, the keeper of the cemetery, whose duties included the maintenance of the graves and the digging of new tombs, had been working here over the last two days. Although the grave was unfinished and empty, Tressach felt a morbid fascination as he stared at the yawning black hole with its piled dark earth around it. His imagination began to run riot and fearful childhood fantasies clutched at his mind. Any moment something fearful could raise itself out of that black pit! He genuflected and turned abruptly away.

Here, at the end of the row of more modern tombs, stood a mound set slightly apart. This type of grave was ancient and called a *dumma*. It was surrounded by a circle of granite pillar stones notched in Ogham, the ancient Irish writing which was falling into disuse since the new faith had brought Latin script into the land. Had it not been so dark, Tressach knew that one

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would have seen that this tomb was more richly endowed than the others. Under its grey stone portals were heavy oak doors, panelled in copper and bronze and reinforced with iron. The panels were studded with patterning of gold and silver.

It was one of the oldest of the graves at Tara. In fact, according to the chroniclers, it was some fifteen hundred years old. It was the tomb of the twenty-sixth High King, Tigernmas, known as "Lord of Death," for he was one of the most warlike of the ancient kings and had won thrice-nine battles in a single year. During his reign, so the old storytellers claimed, the first gold and silver mines were discovered and worked in Ireland. Tigernmas had become a rich and powerful king. It was he who had ordained that the people should wear clothes of varied colours to denote their clans and social status.

Of all the tombs that Tressach would have to pass this fearsome evening, he was most apprehensive of the tomb of Tigernmas. The old annalists had it that Tigernmas had forsaken the ancient gods and turned to worship an idol dedicated to blood and vengeance. Sacrifices were made at the feast of Samhain on the plain of Magh Slecht. Because of this, a terrible disaster had overtaken Tigernmas. He and all his followers died of a strange illness and his body was then returned to Tara to be interred in this last resting place of kings.

Tressach knew the story well and wished, for at least this night, that he could expunge it from his imagination. He clasped his sword hilt more firmly with one hand as he held the lantern high with the other. It gave him comfort. He was about to hurry on past the tomb of Tigernmas when a scream poleaxed him. His limbs lost all form of movement. It was a muffled cry, a strangled cry of pain.

Then an agonised voice distinctly cried: "Help me! God help me!"

Tressach broke into a cold sweat, unable to move, unable to make a sound from his suddenly constricted and dry throat.

There was no question in his mind that the cry had come from the long-sealed tomb of Tigernmas.

The Abbot Colmán, spiritual advisor to the Great Assembly of the chieftains of the five kingdoms of Ireland, a thickset, ruddy-faced man in his mid fifties, rose to greet the young religieuse who had just entered his chamber. She was tall, with grey-green eyes and rebellious strands of red hair escaping from under her headdress.

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"Sister Fidelma! It is always good to see you here at Tara. Alas, you do not often bless us with a visit."

He came forward with both hands outstretched.

"Dominus tecum," replied the religieuse solemnly, observing protocol. But the smiling abbot shook his head, gripped her hands warmly, and guided her to a chair beside the fire. They were old friends but it had been some time since their last meeting.

"I was wondering whether we should see you here this year for the convention. All the other judges and lawyers have already arrived."

Sister Fidelma, of the house of Brigid of Kildare, grimaced wryly.

"It would have been remiss of me to fail to attend, for there are many contentious matters that I want to debate with the Chief Brehon."

Since the reign of the High King Ollamh Fodhla, twelve hundred years before, the *féis* of Tara had met every three years to discuss the law of the land. Judges, lawyers, and administrators gathered to debate the workings of the law and whether, in the light of changing society, any amendments or changes needed to be made.

Abbot Colmán smiled happily and offered Fidelma a drink of mulled imported Gaulish wine. When she indicated her acceptance he took down a pottery amphora, emptying some of the red wine into a jug, then, taking a red-hot poker from the fire, he dipped it into the sizzling liquid. Then he poured a measure into a silver goblet.

The evening was chill and Fidelma appreciated the warm liquid.

"Is it really three years since you were last at Tara?" inquired the abbot, shaking his head in mock disbelief as he seated himself in a chair opposite her.

"It does seem a lifetime ago," agreed Fidelma.

"The king still speaks with wonder of how you solved the mystery of his stolen sword."

"How is Sechnassach, the king? Is he well? And his family, do they prosper?"

"They are all well, *Deo gratias,"* the abbot said piously. "But I hear that much has happened to you since . . ."

He was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door.

The abbot made an apologetic glance towards Fidelma and bade the caller enter.

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It needed no expertise to see that the warrior who stood there was in some state of shock. In spite of his sheepskin cloak, his body shook as if with intense cold and his face was white. The lips quivered almost uncontrollably. His dark eyes flickered from the abbot to the young religieuse and back again.

"Well, man," Colmán said sharply. "Out with it. What is it you seek?"

"Lord Abbot," the man hesitated. His voice was a mumble.

Colmán heaved an impatient sigh.

"Speak up, man!"

"I am Tressach of the palace guard. My captain, Irél, has sent me to fetch you. There has been an incident . . ."

Tressach's voice trailed nervously away.

"An incident?" queried Colmán. "What incident?"

"There has been an incident in the cemetery of the High Kings. Irél requests that you should attend immediately."

"Why? What incident?" Colmán obviously did not enjoy the prospect of having to leave the warmth of his hearth and wine. However, the abbot was both an officer of the royal court and an ecclesiastical advisor, and any incident affecting spiritual matters at Tara, in which the upkeep of the cemetery was included, came under his jurisdiction.

Sister Fidelma had been examining the nervous warrior under lowered brows as she sipped her wine. The man was clearly in a state of extreme unease. The abbot's abrupt manner was not helping him. She placed her goblet on the table and smiled reassuringly up at him.

"Tell us what has happened and then we may see how best we can help."

The warrior spread his arms helplessly as he turned to her.

"I was on guard. By the tombs, that is. This very evening, I was on guard. Abruptly there came a scream from the tomb of Tigernmas . . ."

"*From* the tomb?" queried Fidelma sharply.

"From inside the tomb, Sister." The warrior lent emphasis to the statement by genuflecting. "I heard a voice crying distinctly for God to help it. I was in mortal fear. I can fight with men but not with the wandering tormented souls of the dead."

Colmán was tut-tutting. His face showed scepticism.

"Is this some mischievous prank? I am well aware what night this is."

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But Fidelma could see that humour was not in the fearful face of the warrior.

"Go on," invited Fidelma. "What did you do?"

"Do, Sister? I hastened away as fast as I could from that accursed place. I ran to report to my captain, Irél. At first, like the abbot, he did not believe me. He and another warrior took me back to the tomb. Oh, by my soul, Sister! The voice came again. It was fainter than before but still crying for help. Irél heard it and so did the other warrior who accompanied us."

It was plain Colmán still did not believe him.

"What is it Irél wants me to do?" he demanded cynically. "Go there and pray for the souls of the dead?"

"No. Irél is one not given to a belief in wandering spirits. My captain wants permission to open the tomb. He believes that someone is inside and hurt."

The abbot looked aghast.

"But that tomb has not been opened in fifteen hundred years," he protested. "How could anyone be inside?"

"That's what Garbh told him," agreed the warrior.

"Garbh?" queried Fidelma.

"The keeper of the cemetery. My captain, Irél, sent for him and requested that he open the doors of the tomb."

"And did Garbh do so?" asked the abbot, irritably.

"No. He refused unless Irél obtained higher authority. That is why Irél sent me to you, to seek your permission."

"Quite right. This is a matter of seriousness," Colmán muttered. "The decision to open tombs is not one a soldier—even the captain of the palace guard—can make. I'd better come along and see this Irél, your captain." Colmán rose to his feet and glanced at Fidelma. "If you will forgive me, Sister . . ."

But Fidelma was rising also.

"I think I will come with you," she said quietly. "For if a voice comes from a sealed tomb, then someone must have been able to enter it . . . or else, God forbid, it is indeed a spirit calling to us."

They found Irél, the sombre-faced captain of the palace guard, standing outside the tomb with another warrior. There was a third man there, a stocky man with rippling muscles who was clad in a workman's leather jerkin and trousers. He had pugnacious features and was arguing with the captain. The man turned as

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they approached and, with relief on his face, greeted Abbot Colmán by name.

"I am glad that you have come, my lord Abbot. This captain is demanding that I break open this tomb. Such an act is sacrilege and I have refused unless ordered to do so by a churchman of authority."

Irél stepped forward and saluted the abbot.

"Has Tressach explained the matter to you?" His voice was curt.

The abbot glanced disdainfully at him.

"Can we hear this voice?" Colmán's tone was sarcastic and he cocked an ear as if to listen.

"We have not heard it since I sent for Garbh," replied Irél, keeping his irritation in check. "I have been trying to get Garbh to open the tomb, for every moment is urgent. Someone may be dying in there."

The man called Garbh laughed drily.

"Look at the doors. Not opened in fifteen hundred years. Whoever died in there, died over a millennium ago."

"Garbh, as keeper of the cemetery, is within his rights to refuse your request," Abbot Colmán explained. "I am not sure that even I can give such permission."

It was then that Sister Fidelma stepped forward.

"In that case, I shall give the order. I think we should open the tomb immediately."

Colmán swung round and frowned at Fidelma.

"Do you take this matter seriously?"

"That an experienced captain of the guard and a warrior take it so should be enough reason to accept that they heard something. Let us see if this is so."

Irél looked at the young religieuse in surprise while Garbh's features were forming into a sneer of derision.

Colmán, however, sighed and motioned to Garbh to start opening the doors of the tomb.

"Sister Fidelma is a *dálaigh,* an advocate of the law courts, and holds the degree of *anruth,"* he explained to them in order to justify his action. "She has the authority."

Garbh's eyes flickered imperceptibly. It was the only indication that he made in recognition of the fact that the young religieuse held a degree which was only one below the highest legal qualification in the land. Irél's shoulders seemed to relax as if in relief that a decision had finally been made.

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It took some time for Garbh to smash open the ancient locks of the door and swing them open.

As they pressed forward there were some gasps of astonishment.

Just inside the door was the body of a man.

They could see that this was no ancient body. It was the body of a man who was but recently dead. From his back there protruded a length of wood with which he had clearly been shot or stabbed. It was like the shaft of an arrow but without feathered flights. He lay facedown behind the doors, hands stretched out as if attempting to open the doors from the inside. They could see that his fingernails were torn and bleeding where he had scrapped at the door in his terror. And his face! The eyes were wide with fear, as if he had been confronted by some evil power of darkness.

Tressach shivered violently. "God look down on us!"

Garbh was rubbing his chin in bewilderment.

"The tomb was securely sealed," he whispered. "You all saw the seals on the door. It has been sealed for fifteen hundred years."

"Yet this man was inside trying to break out." Fidelma pointed out the obvious. "He was apparently dying even as Irél was ordering the tomb to be opened. It was his dying cries that Tressach and Irél heard."

Irél glanced towards Sister Fidelma.

"This is hardly a sight for a sister of the Faith," he protested as he saw her moving forward.

"I am a *dálaigh,*" she reminded him. "I shall take charge of this investigation."

Irél glanced questioningly to Abbot Colmán, who nodded slightly, and the captain stood aside to allow Fidelma to enter the tomb. She ordered the lanterns to be held up to illuminate the area.

Fidelma moved forward curiously. She had heard all the stories of Tigernmas, the infamous High King, who had ordered his Druids to be put to death and turned to the worship of a gigantic idol. Generations of children had been frightened into obedience with tales of how the evil king's soul would ascend from the Otherworld and take them off unless they obeyed their parents. And now she stood at the door of his tomb, unopened since his body had been placed in it countless generations ago. It was not an inviting place. The air was stale, dank, and smelling of rotting earth and vegetation. A noxious, unclean atmosphere permeated the place.

The first thing she noticed was that the body was of a man of

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middle years, somewhat plump, with well-kempt white hair. She examined the torn and bleeding hands and looked at the softness of the fingers and palms. He was clearly someone not used to manual work. She examined his clothing. Apart from the dust and dirt of the tomb and the stains of blood from his wound, they were the clothes of someone of rank. Yet he wore no jewellery, no symbols of office, and when she examined the leather purse attached to the belt around his waist, she found only a few coins in it.

Only when she had conducted this scrutiny did she turn to examine his face. She tried to ignore the terrible mask of dread on it. Then she frowned and called for a lantern to be held more closely, studying the features with some dim memory tugging at her mind. The features seemed familiar to her.

"Abbot Colmán, please look at this man," she called. "I have a feeling that I should know him."

Colmán moved forward somewhat unwillingly and bent down beside her.

"Christ's wounds!" exclaimed the abbot, forgetting his calling. "It is Fiacc, the Chief Brehon of Ardgal."

Fidelma nodded grimly. She knew that she had seen the man's features before. The chief judge of the clan of Ardgal was one of the learned judges of the country.

"He must have been here to attend the convention," breathed Colmán.

Fidelma rose and dusted her clothing. "The more important thing to discover is what he was doing here at all," she pointed out. "How did a respected judge come to be in a tomb which has never been opened in generations and get himself stabbed to death."

"Witchcraft!" supplied Tressach in a breathless tone.

Irél glanced at his subordinate with a look of derision.

"Don't the teachings of Patrick's first council tell us there is no such thing as witchcraft?" he rebuked, before turning to Fidelma. "There must be an explanation for this, Sister."

Fidelma smiled appreciatively at the man's pedestrian approach.

"There is an explanation for everything," she agreed, as she let her eyes wander into the interior of the tomb. "Sometimes it is not easily seen, however." Then she turned back to Colmán. "Would you consult with the steward of the convention and see if Fiacc was in attendance and whether he was due to speak?"

Colmán hesitated only a moment before hurrying away on his task.

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Fidelma bent again to the corpse. There was no disputing the cause of death. The shaft of wood, like an arrow, was stuck in the back of the corpse under the shoulder blade.

"The worst place to try to stab a man," sniffed Irél. "To stab him in the back," he added when Fidelma glanced up questioningly at him. "You can never be sure of inflicting a mortal wound. There are too many bones in the way of a vital organ, any of which might deflect the blow. It is better to stab from the front, in and up under the rib cage."

He spoke with the relish of a warrior.

"So you would say that whoever delivered the blow was an amateur when it came to killing?" asked Fidelma drily.

Irél considered the point.

"Not necessarily. The implement has been inserted slightly to the side and with an upward thrust towards the heart. The killer knew what he was about. He was aiming to pierce the heart immediately. Nevertheless, the victim lived on for a while. If he had not, we would never have heard his cries and discovered the body."

"You are very observant, Irél. But why do you ascribe the killing to a man?"

Irél shrugged indifferently.

"It is logical. Look at the depth at which the wood is buried in the flesh. It would take strength to thrust it in so far."

Fidelma could not fault the logic. But she was examining the shaft of wood with more interest. It was a piece of aspen, some eighteen inches or more in length, and it was inscribed with Ogham characters. She ran her finger over the cut letters, feeling the faint stickiness of the sap. The words meant "The gods protect us." It was now obvious what it was. The aspen wand was called a *fé*—an instrument by which corpses and graves were measured. It was generally regarded as an unlucky object and no one would willingly touch a *fé* unless they had need to.

Even Fidelma felt that she had to summon a special courage before she reached over and yanked the piece of wood from the corpse of Fiacc. She immediately saw that it was no ordinary *fé*. Where the shaft had been driven in, it had been whittled into a sharp point and, when she'd wiped the blood on the clothes of the corpse, her eyes narrowed as she observed that this point had been hardened by fire.

Tressach, standing nearby, was gazing aghast at Fidelma's handling of the wooden *fé*.

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"Sister," he reproached, "it is highly unlucky to handle that. And to handle the very *fé* that measured this tomb for Tigernmas . . ."

Fidelma did not reply. She rose to examine the rest of the tomb.

It was an oval-shaped chamber cut into a mound of earth with its floors flagged with stones while granite blocks lined the walls and were placed so that they formed a natural archlike structure across the entire roof. The length of the tomb was about fifteen feet, and its width a little more than twelve. Fidelma was thankful that the open doors of the tomb had allowed fresher, chill evening air to dispel the fetid atmosphere.

There was no need to ask where the remains of Tigernmas were. At the far end of the tomb, in a central position, stood an upright, rusting iron frame. In it, almost crumbled to pieces, were the remains of a skeleton. There were some fragments of clothing on it; a metal belt buckle and a rusty sword had fallen nearby. It had been the custom for the ancients to bury their chieftains and great rulers standing upright and facing their enemies, sword clasped in their dead hand. This iron cage had obviously been designed to keep the corpse upright in the burial chamber. By this method, it was said, the aura of the dead was supposed to protect the living. The skull of the skeleton had fallen to one side in the cage so that its eyeless sockets appeared to be staring with malignant force in the direction of the dead Fiacc. The skeletal grin seemed to be one of satisfaction. Fidelma felt irritated at the way her imagination interpreted these images.

To one side of the tomb were the rotting remains of a chariot. This would be the king's most cherished vehicle, left there to help transport him to the Otherworld. Jars and containers of what had once been his favourite foods and drink stood nearby, large bronze and copper containers made by skilled craftsmen.

Fidelma moved forward and her foot caught at something. She bent down and picked up a small but weighty bar of metal. Having examined it closely by Irél's lantern, she realised that it was silver. She set it down carefully, and as she did so she saw a few brooches scattered about. They were of semiprecious jewels set in gold mountings. Again, it was the custom to bury a portion of wealth with a great chieftain, for he would also need some means to help him in his journey to the Otherworld. Frowning thoughtfully, Fidelma continued to examine the rest of the tomb.

By the beam of the lantern, Fidelma noticed that a small trail of blood led from a point before the iron cage of the skeleton to where

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the corpse of Fiacc lay before the doors. She could also see scratch marks on the granite floor.

Irél, standing beside her, articulated her thoughts.

"He was obviously stabbed while standing by the cage and then contrived to drag himself to the doors."

Fidelma did not bother to glance at him.

"Obviously," she replied shortly.

At the entrance of the tomb, Garbh, the keeper of the cemetery, was standing with Tressach and the other warrior, watching her progress with fascination.

"Speaking of things obvious, does it not surprise you that there is so little dust and dirt on the floor of this tomb?" she asked Irél. "It is almost as if it had been recently swept."

Irél stared at her, wondering whether she was making a joke. But she had passed on, examining the floor and looking carefully at one of the stone slabs that made up its surface. She pointed to the scratch marks across the floor.

"Bring your lantern closer," she instructed. "What do you make of those?"

The captain shrugged. "It is probably where the floor stones were scored by ropes while they were being dropped into place."

"Exactly so," agreed Fidelma quietly. "And have you noticed anything else that is curious about this sepulchre?"

Irél glanced quickly around but shook his head.

"Tigernmas, although he subsequently developed an evil reputation, is accredited as the king who first encouraged gold and silver to be smelted and works of great art to be produced in this land."

"I have heard the stories," replied Irél.

"And it was the custom of our people to place grave goods in the tombs, together with symbols of their wealth and power."

"That much is well known," acknowledged Irél, slightly irritated at Fidelma for not addressing the more urgent problem.

"Apart from a few golden brooches and a silver bar, which I see lying on the floor there as if they were hurriedly discarded, where are the riches that one would have expected to find in this tomb? It is singularly devoid of any such items."

Irél tried to see some connection that Fidelma's remark might have with the murder of Fiacc but failed. He was not interested in the customs of the ancients.

"Is that significant?" he asked.

"Perhaps."

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Fidelma walked back to the corpse and looked down at it once more. There was a movement outside and Abbot Colmán came hurrying back.

"Fiacc was certainly due to attend the convention tomorrow," he confirmed. "The steward says that Fiacc and his wife, Étromma, arrived in Tara a few days ago. However, and this is interesting, there was a problem, for, the steward says, Fiacc was to be heard before the Chief Brehon to answer charges which, if proved, would have debarred him from practice as a judge."

"A special hearing?" Fidelma had heard nothing about such a contentious matter. She cast a final look around the tomb before returning her gaze to Colmán.

"Does the steward have details of the charges against Fiacc?"

"Only that it was something to do with malpractice. Only the Chief Brehon has the details."

"Has Étromma been informed of her husband's death?"

"I took it upon myself to send word to her."

"Then I think I should go and speak with her."

"Is that necessary? She will be distraught. Perhaps tomorrow would be a more suitable time?"

"It is necessary to see her now in order to clear up this mystery."

Abbot Colmán spread his hands in acquiescence.

"Very well. What about . . . ?" He did not finish but gestured towards the tomb.

It was Garbh who finished the question: "Shouldn't the body of this man be removed so that I can reseal the tomb?"

"Not for the moment," replied Fidelma. "Irél, have a guard mounted outside the tomb. Everything is to be left as it is until I order otherwise. Hopefully, I shall have resolved the mystery before midnight. Then the tomb can be resealed."

She left the tomb and began to walk slowly and thoughtfully back through the graves of the High Kings. She paused for a moment, waiting for Abbot Colmán to catch up with her. He had paused a moment to issue final instructions to Irél. Her eyes flickered towards the yawning pit of a freshly dug grave and suppressed a shiver. Colmán came panting along a moment later and together they walked leisurely towards the lights of the main palace complex.

Étromma was surprisingly young to be the wife of a middle-aged judge. She was scarcely more than eighteen years old. She sat

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stiffly but in complete control of herself. There was little sign of anguish or of grieving on her features. The cold, calculating blue eyes stared with hostility at Fidelma. The lips were thinned and pressed together. A small nerve twitching at the corner of her mouth was the only sign of expression on her features.

"I was divorcing Fiacc. He was about to be disbarred and he had no money," she replied coldly to a question Fidelma had asked her.

Fidelma was seated before her, while Abbot Colmán stood nervously by the fire.

"I do not see how the two things fit together, Étromma," she commented.

"I do not want to spend my life in poverty. It was an agreement between us. Fiacc was an old man. I married him only for security. He knew that."

"What about love?" queried Fidelma mildly. "Had you no feelings for him?"

For the first time Étromma smiled, a humourless parting of her lips. "Love? What is that? Does love provide financial security?"

Fidelma sighed softly.

"Why was Fiacc facing disbarment from practice as a judge?" Fidelma chose a new tack.

"During this last year he had made many wrong judgments. He was, as you know, judge of the Ardgal. After so many wrong judgments, he was no longer trusted by the people. He had made himself destitute from the continual payment of compensation."

Fidelma knew that a judge had to deposit a pledge of five *séd,* or ounces of silver, for each case he tried as a surety against error. If, on appeal by the defendant to higher judges, a panel of no fewer than three more experienced judges, a judge was found to have made an error, then this pledge was confiscated and the judge ordered to pay further compensation of one *cumal,* the equivalent of the value of three silver *séd.*

"How many wrong judgments had your husband made this last year, then? How could he have become poverty-stricken?"

"There were eleven wrong judgments during this last year."

Fidelma's eyebrows raised in surprise. Eighty-eight silver *séd,* which could buy nearly thirty milch cows, was a staggering sum to have to pay out in compensation in a single year. No wonder there was talk of disbarring Fiacc.

"He was to be heard before the Chief Brehon to answer the fact that he had gone into debt to pay fines and to answer for his

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competency as a judge," Étromma added.

"Are you saying that he had borrowed money to pay?"

"That is why I was divorcing him."

Fidelma realised that a judge who turned to moneylenders to support him would certainly be disbarred if he could not present a valid argument to endorse his actions. Clearly, Fiacc had been in considerable trouble.

"So your husband was worried about his situation?"

Étromma chuckled drily.

"Worried? No, he was not. At least not recently."

"Not worried?" pressed Fidelma sharply.

"He tried to stop me divorcing him by claiming that it was only a temporary matter and that he was not really destitute. He said that he was expecting money shortly and, after that, if the people did not want him as judge, he would be rich enough to live without working."

"Did he explain where the money was coming from? How would he pay off his debts and find the money to live for the rest of his life in any degree of comfort?"

"He did not explain. Nor did I care. I think he was just a liar or a fool. It was his problem. He knew that if he lied to me and he was disbarred and shown to be penniless then I would leave. It was as simple as that. I was not going to recall my application for divorce."

Fidelma tried to conceal her dislike of the cold, commercial attitude of the young woman.

"You were not at all interested where your husband would suddenly obtain money, if he actually did so?"

"I knew he would not. He was a liar."

"At what point did he become confident that he would manage to obtain money to pay his debts?"

The woman Étromma reflected for a moment.

"I suppose that he started to brag that he was going to overcome this problem a day or so ago. Yes, it was yesterday morning."

"You mean that he was worried until yesterday morning?"

"Precisely so."

"When did you both arrive here at Tara?"

"Four days ago."

"And during that time, Fiacc was concerned? Then yesterday morning his attitude changed?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Did he meet with anyone here?"

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Étromma shrugged. "He was known to many people here. I was not interested in his friends."

"I mean, was there anyone in particular with whom he spent some time at Tara? Was there anyone who could be described as a close friend or confidant?"

"Not so far as I know. He was a solitary man. I do not think he met with anyone here. He kept to himself. The only thing that I know he did was go for walks on his own in the graveyard of the High Kings." Étromma paused to sniff. "I thought he was getting maudlin. But, as I said, yesterday he came back grinning like a cat who had found a dish of cream. He assured me that things would be all right. I knew he was a liar, so I was not going to alter my plans to leave him."

Fidelma stood up abruptly.

"I will not express my condolences, Étromma," she said with emphasis. "Doubtless you do not expect them. You are obviously more concerned with the financial arrangements. Fiacc was still your husband when he met his death. Your husband was murdered. I think I now know who the murderer is and, if proven, the compensation due for the slaying of your husband, as a Brehon of lower rank, is three *séd* of silver. It is not a fortune but it will keep you momentarily from poverty, and doubtless you will soon find someone else to support you."

Abbot Colmán followed her unhappily along the corridors of the palace towards his chamber. "You were harsh, Sister. After all, she has just been widowed and is only eighteen years old."

Fidelma was indifferent.

"I meant to be harsh. She felt nothing for Fiacc. He was merely a source of income for her. She proclaims her motto without shame—*lucri bonus est odor ex requalibet.*"

Colmán grimaced. "Sweet is the smell of money obtained from any source. Isn't that from Juvenal's *Satires?*"

Fidelma smiled briefly.

"Send for Irél, Tressach, and Garbh to come to your chamber. I think I can now solve this problem."

It was not long before the three men crowded curiously into the abbot's chamber.

Fidelma was seated in a chair before the fire while Colmán stood with his back to it, a little to one side. His hands were clasped behind his back.

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"Well now." Fidelma raised her head and regarded them each in turn before addressing the warrior, Tressach. "How long have you been a guard at Tara, Tressach?"

"Three years, Sister."

"And how long have you patrolled the compound containing the tombs of the High Kings?"

"One year."

"And you, Irél? You are captain of the guards of Tara. How long have you been here?"

"I entered the service of the High Kings some ten years ago. Conall Cáel was still High King then. I have been captain here for the last year."

She looked from one to another and shook her head sadly.

"And how long has Sechnassach been High King?" she continued.

Irél frowned, not understanding the logic of this question. He regarded Fidelma as if she were joking. But her expression was completely serious.

"How long? You must know that, Sister. Everyone does. It was three years ago when the joint High Kings, Diarmait and Blathmac, died of the yellow plague within a week of one another. That was when Sechnassach became High King."

"Three years ago?" pressed Fidelma.

"You must remember, Fidelma," interrupted Colmán, wondering how she could have forgotten. "You were in Tara on that occasion yourself." But she ignored him and continued to direct her questions to Irél.

"And is the High King in good health?"

"To my knowledge, thanks be to God," Irél replied, becoming slightly defensive.

"And his family?" continued Fidelma remorselessly. "Are they in good health?"

"Indeed, the High King is blessed."

"I told you as much myself when you arrived earlier," frowned Colmán, wondering if Fidelma was losing her memory.

"So what is the purpose of the new grave being dug behind the tomb of Tigernmas?"

The question was asked so softly that it took a moment or two for its implication to sink in. Fidelma's fiery green eyes were fixed on the keeper of the cemetery.

Garbh's mouth dropped open and he began to stutter. Then he hung his head in silence.

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"Hold him," instructed Fidelma calmly. "He is to be held for premeditated murder and grave robbery."

With astonished expressions, Irél and Tressach moved close to the side of the keeper of the cemetery.

Fidelma now rose languidly to her feet and gazed sorrowfully at Garbh. "There has been no death of a High King or any member of his family during the last three years. Sechnassach is still young and healthy. Why then dig a new grave in the cemetery of the High Kings? Will you explain, Garbh, or shall I?"

Garbh remained silent.

"You started digging the grave in order to construct a small passage into the tomb of Tigernmas, didn't you, Garbh?"

"For what purpose would one want to enter an ancient tomb?" demanded Colmán, chagrined that he had not spotted such an obvious matter as the new grave.

"To rob the tomb, of course," replied Fidelma. "Where were all the gold, silver, and jewels that would have been buried with Tigernmas? Only a single silver bar and some gold jewellery lay discarded on the floor of the burial chamber. Tigernmas was a king of many legends. But it was well known that he ruled a rich court. Following the custom of our ancestors, rich grave goods would have been placed there to serve him in the Otherworld."

Irél was looking shamefaced. Fidelma had pointed out this very fact to him and it had not registered.

"But there is much to be explained," he pointed out. "How did the judge, Fiacc, come to be there? Had he spotted Garbh's intention and tried to catch him?"

Fidelma shook her head. "It was Fiacc's idea to rob the tomb in the first place. Fiacc had married a mercenary young woman. Fiacc had also made several mistakes in judgment and had become destitute through the payment of compensation. He was desperately in debt. He needed money badly. He needed money prior to his hearing before the Chief Brehon tomorrow. Money to cover his debts and money to keep his capricious young wife. It was Fiacc's idea to rob the tomb of Tigernmas, which, according to the chroniclers, contained great riches. But how was he to do it on his own?"

"Do you have the explanation?" Colmán asked.

"When he arrived at Tara, Fiacc spent a day or so in the cemetery examining the tomb. He realised there was only one way to get access without attracting any attention. He enlisted the aid of Garbh, the keeper of the graves. Once Garbh saw the simplicity of

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the plan, greed took over. Money is always a great incentive.

"Garbh was always in the cemetery, repairing tombs. It was Garbh's job to dig the graves when a High King or his family died. No one was bothered when Garbh started to dig a grave near the sepulchre of Tigernmas. No one even thought to ask why he was digging a grave. Everyone saw Garbh at what was presumed to be his usual lawful task.

"Garbh and Fiacc broke into the tomb of Tigernmas this evening. When you come to examine the new grave which Garbh has dug, and which he meant to fill in tomorrow, you will find traces of a short tunnel into the tomb. It will come up under the floor, under one of the granite slabs. One of those slabs, Irél, with the scratch marks on it which you so rightly observed had been made by ropes used to reset it into its proper place in the floor. The plan was that Garbh and Fiacc would extract the riches and reseal the passage so that no one would know that the tomb had even been entered. A few items were overlooked in the haste to extract everything. A bar of silver and some jewellery were left behind. But that was all."

"How did Fiacc die?" demanded Irél, trying to follow the story.

"Was it the curse of Tigernmas that struck him down?" Tressach asked fearfully.

"Fiacc died," replied Fidelma coldly, "because Garbh decided that he did not want to share the easy money that had come his way. Having been shown the almost effortless way to gain riches, Garbh wanted those riches for himself. He waited until he and Fiacc had removed all the loot from the tomb and were cleaning up. Fiacc, you see, being a judge, was very meticulous about his planning. In case some accident caused the tomb to be opened, he had decided that the dust on the floor, which would show evidence of their activity and might provide a clue to their identity, should be swept away."

Irél groaned. Again, Fidelma had pointed this out to him and it had not registered as important.

"Go on," he urged. "You have told us why Fiacc died. Now tell us how exactly he died?"

"It was after the spoils had been removed and the cleaning finished that Garbh, using a *fé*, the measuring stick for graves, stabbed Fiacc in the back and thought he had killed him. He then left the tomb, resealed the entrance, and went back to the grave he was digging, perhaps filling in the tunnel after him. We shall

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see that later. I would imagine that he has stored his spoils in or near his cabin."

Garbh shifted uneasily at this and Fidelma smiled in satisfaction.

"Yes, Irél, I think you will find the treasure of Tigernmas hidden at Garbh's cabin."

"But Fiacc was not killed immediately," Tressach interrupted. "Garbh left him wounded in the tomb when he resealed it."

"Garbh did not realise this. He thought he had killed Fiacc. The wound made Fiacc pass out. He was badly hurt. He was dying. But he came to consciousness and realised that he was sealed in the darkened tomb. He realised, in terror, that he himself was entombed. He gave a scream of dread, which you, Tressach, in passing the tomb, heard. He began to drag himself to the wooden doors, crying in desperation. Not knowing that Tressach had heard his scream, he began to scrabble at the doors until, in that fearful moment of horror, death overtook him."

"I did not mean to kill him. It was an argument," Garbh said slowly, speaking now for the first time and admitting guilt. "It was Fiacc who wanted the greater part of the wealth for himself. He said that he would only give me a small portion of the spoils. When I demanded a fair and equal share, he attacked me. He picked up the old grave measure and attacked me and I defended myself. In the struggle, he was stabbed. I was not responsible for murder. You cannot punish me for that."

Fidelma shook her head.

"Oh no, Garbh. You plotted to kill Fiacc from the very beginning. As soon as Fiacc had explained the plan to you, you decided that you wanted all the spoils from the tomb. You kept Fiacc alive long enough for him to be of help in gaining entrance to the tomb and taking out the treasure. You planned to kill him and leave him in the tomb, hoping that no one would ever open the tomb again. Your mistake was twofold: firstly, not ensuring that he was dead when you left him, and secondly, vanity."

"You cannot prove I set out to kill Fiacc!" cried Garbh. "If I had meant to kill him I would have taken a weapon into the tomb. Fiacc was killed by an old grave measurement left lying in the tomb. Even Irél will bear witness to that."

Irél reluctantly nodded in agreement.

"That seems so, Sister. It was a *fé* that killed Fiacc. You know that. And there was Ogham carved on it. I know the ancient script. It read, 'May the gods protect us.' The reference to the *gods*

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and not *God* shows that it belonged to the pagan tomb. It must have been lying in the burial chamber."

"Not so. The grave measure was made by Garbh," insisted Fidelma. She pointed to the table in the abbot's room on which she had already laid the *fé* taken from the tomb.

"That was not the *fé* that measured the tomb of Tigernmas. Look at it closely. The wood is new. The Ogham notches are clean-cut. Examine the cuts. There are traces of sap still drying. Whoever cut this, cut it within the last twenty-four hours."

Colmán had picked up the stick, taking care to genuflect to keep himself from harm at the handling of such an unlucky instrument, and examined it carefully.

"The piece of aspen is still in sap," he confirmed wonderingly.

"Garbh had burnt a point on it to ensure that it was hard and able to be used as a dagger. He carved some Ogham on it as an afterthought. That was his vanity. He had taken notice of Fiacc's exhortation to detail and thought of a great joke to play on Fiacc. If the tomb was ever excavated, they would find Fiacc with an ancient pagan *fé* stuck into his heart. Garbh was too clever for his own good. It was easy to see that the *fé* was new-cut. And it proves that Garbh premeditated the murder. He prepared his murder weapon before he entered the tomb. It was not a spur-of-the-moment argument."

Garbh said nothing. The blood had drained from his features.

"You may take him away now," Fidelma instructed Irél. "And you may make the arrangements to reseal the tomb . . . but after the treasures of Tigernmas are replaced in it." She grinned impishly. "It would not do, this night of all nights, to provoke the spirit of Tigernmas by keeping back any of his gold or silver, would it?"

Abbot Colmán was pouring more mulled wine and handed the goblet to Fidelma. "A sorry story, indeed," he sighed. "An avaricious official and a corrupt judge. How can such wickedness be explained?"

"You forget Étromma in that summation," replied Fidelma. "She was the catalyst who made Fiacc's need of money so desperate and who started this chain of events. It was her lack of love, her selfishness, and, above all, her greed that caused this human tragedy. It is said in the book of Timothy: *radix omnium malorum est cupiditas.*"

"The love of money is the root of all evil," translated Abbot Colmán and then bent his head in agreement. ●

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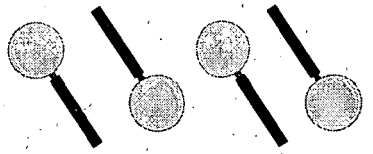

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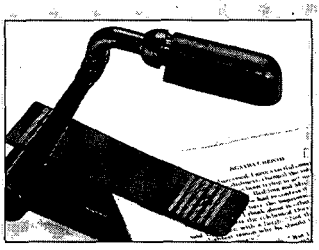

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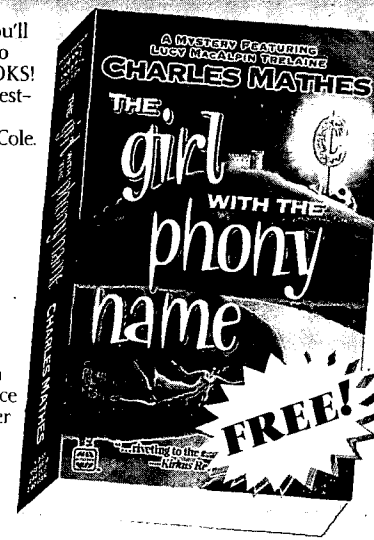

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